

**COSTUMES AND DRESS CODES AS TOOLS FOR CULTURAL
CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN PERFORMATIVE ART**

by

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The thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR PHILOSOPHY (PhD) IN ART

In the subject

ART

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR NOMBEKO P MPAKO

JANUARY 2024

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I declare that the above thesis is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the thesis to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

Bongamahlubi Ngcobo

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DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to those individuals, artists or creative people who used dress code as a form of non-verbal or visual means of communicating to express and convey a standpoint or subject matter within a social context.

I also dedicate this to my late mother, Lihan Jabulile Hadebe and my two beautiful children, Uyanda and Skhanyiso.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The task of carrying out and completing this study would have never been realised without the support and assistance received from several individuals and institutions, each in their own unique way.

I am profoundly grateful to the University of South Africa (UNISA) for the financial support. I would like to acknowledge my appreciation for the financial support received from the University of South Africa (Unisa) in the form of a bursary for the tuition fees. My sincere gratitude goes to my supervisor, Prof. Nombeko Mpako, for the support, remarks, comments, and comprehensive engagement through the learning process of this study.

My research would have been impossible without the aid and support of the following artists: Wezile, Steven Cohen, Carin Bester and all the Focus Groups (Group A, B & C) who participated in this study as part of data collection. Without their participation, this research report would have been misinformed. Thank you for ensuring that this thesis is informed by grounded data from your sincere inputs.

I am also eternally grateful to the following people who provided research support to this study: Duduzile Mathebula, Sthembiso Pollen Mkhize, Dr Ignatius Dankiso Chungi Mabula, Bonolo Mafoyane, Noqobo (Nox) Chitepo, Nthambeleni Seshibedi, Dr Vusabantu Ngema, Dr Thivhafuni Tshishonge, Dr Odunayo Orimolade, Bongani Ntombela and Masopha Lous Mosekari. Thank you very much guys for all your valuable support.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Nkosikhona Bongamahlubi Ngcobo is an internationally acclaimed South African creative socialist specialising in the fields of graphic design, art, and photography. Hailing from a village called Eastbourne Farm in Newcastle, in KwaZulu-Natal. Nkosikhona completed his formative levels of education at Nkabane Primary School and matriculated at Panorama High School. He studied for his first post-school qualification at the Vaal University of Technology, where he graduated with both his Diploma and Bachelor of technology (B-Tech) in fine art. He went on to do his two Master's degrees, first at the University of South Africa (Unisa), a Master of Visual Art (MVA), and secondly at the Tshwane University of Technology, a Master of Technology (MTech) in Visual Communication. His commitment to his trade has led him to pursue his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Art under the supervision of Prof. Mpako, still at Unisa.

In 2008, Nkosikhona represented South Africa at the 8th International Biennial of African Contemporary Art (DakArt 2008) held in Dakar, Senegal, from 9 May to 9 June, which featured 36 talented artists from different parts of Africa and the Diaspora where he received awards for video production. He went on to win two awards from the Ministry for Culture Award and the Zuloga Foundation Award for his entry, entitled 'Praying for Peace' which he enjoyed the privilege of presenting at the Southern African Development Community Women and Peace Dialogue 2008 at the invitation of the former First Lady, Mrs Zanele Mbeki.

His artworks have been exhibited locally and internationally (in South Africa, Senegal, Germany, The Royal Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, Beirut, France, Lebanon, and Denmark). The list below highlights some of the international exhibitions, events and conferences where his artworks have been featured:

- 2006: Braziers international artists exhibition which included artists from such countries as India, Kosovo, Israel, Ireland, Kenya, Lebanon, Palestine, Kenya, Azerbaijan, Netherlands, United States of America, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom.
- 2008: 8th Biennale of African Contemporary Art Exhibition in Senegal from 8 May 2008 to 9 June 2008 where 36 artists are showcased their works -

www.dakart.org

- 2008: Attended the International Festival of the Arts in Arnhem (IFAA) Holland. The first of its kind in Holland, and the festival focused on highlighting important issues at the time, Modern Art in Arnhem.
2008: Private exhibition at Afrika Museum in Holland.
- 2009: 'For your Eyes only', 1-30 March 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark
http://www.raaderum.com/?page_id=176 2009: Retrospective exhibition of Dak'art. The exhibit.
 - 2009: IFA exhibition - Retrospective exhibition of Dak'art in June which then moved to Stuttgart from September 11 until October 31.
 - 2009: The exhibition started in Berlin on April 3rd till June 21th and moved on to Stuttgart from September 11th till October 31th.
<http://www.ifa.de/en/exhibitions/dt/rueckblick/2009/dakar/>
- 2011: The international exhibition of sculptural and photographic artworks called "In Family Unity - Unity of the World" is held in every country in two conceptually different places, one being a leading University and another – an international airport. In Russia Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University). <http://en.expo-family.com/section/49/>
- 2014: Group exhibition from 7 February to 5 March 2014 at Famius Cloister in France.
- 2018: A curated art exhibition as part of the 7th Biennial Conference of The International Tourism Studies Association. The exhibition duration 6-8 August 2018.
- 2018: Endangered Bodies International Conference / Art Exhibition, to take place in FLUL Portugal on October 1st-15th 2018 at University of Lisbon.

2019: From 80 applicants, Nkosikhona was amongst 13 artists selected to give an interpretation of Resurgence from each participant's perspective. Henley International

Business School commissioned these artists to by providing them structural pillars as canvases from which to visually showcase their works.

Two of his artworks were selected for a group show entitled "2020 Breathing While Black", which took place at Augusta Savage Gallery at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the USA.

<http://www.umass.edu/fac/flipPDF/BWB/BreathingWhileBlack.html>

In the 2021 The New Voices of Ireland 2021 series where, he partnered with Romanian-born filmmaker Irina Maldea to produce a collaboration video for The New Voices of Ireland 2021.

TITLE: COSTUMES AND DRESS CODES AS TOOLS FOR CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL COMMENTARY IN PERFORMATIVE ART

ABSTRACT

This study highlights the importance of costumes and dress codes first as means of cultural construction, and secondly as tools for social commentary art. Its main aim was to discern whether culturally conceived perceptions about the meaning and interpretation of a costume affect the message a performing artist is conveying. The objective was to answer the question of whether the performance can convey the same message in social commentary art without the performer's chosen costumes as the vital elements of the actualisation of artworks. The diverse and open-ended interpretation and meaning of clothing were interrogated through the application of the theory of the sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics. The study made the argument that when viewers interpret the meaning of artworks that utilise clothes, they are influenced by their prior or cultural knowledge, leading to multiple interpretations of messages and meanings. Six artists were selected to be informants and subjects of this study. The first group included Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe, and Carin Bester, who were chosen due to their performances that comment on social issues and utilise clothing. The second group consisted of Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare, and Nandipha Mntambo selected for the performative nature and use of clothing in their various artworks. Focus group interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method for this study to firstly decipher the messages and meanings of the six chosen artists' works. Secondly, to discover whether there is a relationship between the performing artists' intention and the viewers' interpretations, as well as to ascertain the impact of clothing on artistic expression as culturally constructed objects with diverse meanings. This study postulated that clothes as culturally constructed objects are interpreted differently when used in art, subverting socially unjustifiable intolerant behaviour as well as socially constructed biases. It further recommended a follow-up exercise aimed at measuring and validating the impact of agency through performance art as a means for social commentary toward social transformation.

KEY TERMS:

Dress code; costumes; performance art; social commentary art; sublime theory; relational aesthetic; Steven Cohen; Wezile Mgibe; Carin Bester; Mary Sibande; Yinka Shonibare; Nandipha Mntambo.

**ISIHLOKO: IIKHOSTYUM NEENDLELA ZOKUNXIBA NJENGEZIXHOBO
ZOPHUHLISO LWENKCUBEKO NOVAKALISOZIMVO
NGEZENTLALO KUBUGCISA OBENZIWA EQONGENI**

ISISHWAKATHELO

Olu phando luqaphela ukubaluleka kweekhostyum neendlela zokunxiba okokuqala njengezixhobo zokuphuhlisa inkcubeko, okwesibini njengezixhobo zovakalisozimvo ngezentlalo kubugcisa obenziwa eqongeni. Injongo yalo ephambili yayikufumanisa ukuba ingaba iingcamango eziqondwe ngokwenkcubeko malunga nentsingiselo yekhostyum kunye nokutolikwa kwesinxibo ziyawuchaphazela na umyalezo odluliselwa ligcisa lokwenziwayo. Injongo yayikukuphendula umbuzo wokuba umdlalo wokwenziwayo uyakwazi na ukudlulisa umyalezo ofanayo kubugcisa bokuvakalisa izimvo ngezentlalo ngaphandle kweekhostyum ekhethwe ligcisa lokwenziwayo njengezona zinto zifunekayo ekuphunyezweni kwemisebenzi yobugcisa. Ingcaciso eyahlukahlukeneyo nevulelekileyo kunye nentsingiselo yesinxibo zaphononongwa ngokusebenzisa ithiyori yobuhle obuncamisayo (*sublime*) nengcamango kaNicholas Bourriauds yobudlelwane bobuhle obuncamisayo. Uphando lwenze ingxoxo yokuba xa ababukeli betolika intsingiselo yemisebenzi yobugcisa esebenzisa iimpahla, bakhuthazwa lulwazi lwabo lwenkcubeko ebebenalo ngaphambili, olukhokelela kwiindlela ngeendlela zokutolika imiyalezo neentsingiselo. Amagcisa okwenziwayo amathandathu akhethwa ukuze be ngabanikezeli bolwazi kunye nabathathinxaxheba kolu phando. Iqela lokuqala labandakanya uSteven Cohen, uWezile Mgibe kunye noCarin Bester, nabakhethwa ngenxa yemisebenzi yabo ephawula ngemiba yezentlalo bekwasebenzisa izinxibo. Iqela lesibini lalinoMary Sibande, uYinka Shonibane kunye noNandipha Mntambo elakhethwa ngenxa yendlela elidlala nelisebenzisa ngayo isinxibo kwimisebenzi yabo yobugcisa eyahlukeneyo. Udliwanondlebe lwamaqela olugxilileyo lwenziwa njengemethodi yokuqokelela iinkcukacha zophando ezisiseko solu phando ukuze okokuqala, ziguqule imiyalezo neentsingiselo zemisebenzi yobugcisa yabadlali abathandathu abakhethiweyo. Okwesibini, ukufumanisa ukuba ngaba bukho na ubudlelwane phakathi kweenjongo zamagcisa okwenziwayo kunye nezimvo zababukeli, kwanokuqinisekisa impembelelo yezinxibo kuvakalelo lobugcisa njengezinto ezakhiwe ngokwenkcubeko nezineentsingiselo ezahlukeneyo. Olu phando lubonise ukuba izinxibo njengezinto

ezakhelwe kwinkcubeko zitolikwa ngokwahlukeneyo xa zisetyenziswa kubugcisa, ukungavumeli/ukujongela phantsi indlela yokuziphatha yezentlalo engafanelekanga nenganyamezelekiyo kunye nemikhethe eyakhelwe kwezentlalo. Lukwacebisa umsebenzi wokulandelela ojolise ekulinganiseni nasekuqinisekiseni ifuthe learhente ngobugcisa obenziwayo njengemizamo yokuvakalisa izimvo ngezentlalo malunga nenguqu kwezentlalo.

ISIGAMA ESINGUNDOQO:

Indlela yokunxiba; iikhostyum; ubugcisa bokwenziwa eqongeni; ubugcisa bovakalisozimvo ngezentlalo; ithiyori yokuchukumisa iimvakalelo; ubudlelwane bobuhle obuncamisayo; uSteven Cohen; uWezile Mgibe; uCarin Bester; uMary Sibande; uYinka Shonibare; uNandipha Mntambo.

**ISIHLOKO: IMVUNULO KANYE NEMISIKO YENGGQEPHU KUSEBENZA
NJENGENDLELA YOKWAKHEKA KWESIKO KANJALO
NOKUDLULISA UMLAYEZO EMPHAKATHINI NGOBUCIKO
OBUBUKWAYO**

OKUCASHUNIWE

Lolu cwaningo luqala ngokugqamisa ukubaluleka kwemvunulo nemisiko yengqephu njengendlela yokwakheka kwesiko, bese futhi likuveza njengobuciko bokudlulisa umlayezo emphakathini. Inhloso yalokhu ukuba kubonakale ukuthi ngakube kuyaphazamiseka yini ukudluliseka komlayezo wamaciko asika ingqephu mayelana nomqondo nencazelo ngemibono yawo ekwakheni isiko. Inhloso bekuwukuphendula umbuzo wokuthi ngakube umsebenzi wobuciko owenziwayo udlulisa umyalezo ofanayo yini emphakathini ngaphandle kokukhetha imvunulo ethile njengokuyiyo ebalulekile ekuboneni umsebenzi owubuciko. Incazelo nomqondo ovulelekile ngezimpahla zokugqoka kutholakale ngokuthi kusetshenziswe itiyori ebheka ubuhle obungefaniswe nombono ka*Nicholas Bourriaud* wokubheka ubuhle bobudlelwano. Ucwaningo luveza ukuthi uma izibukeli zihumusha incazelo yemisebenzi yobuciko ethinta izimpahla zokugqoka, zibuka ngendlela yolwazi lwazo lwangaphambili noma lwamasiko, okuholela ekutheni zihumushe imiyalezo nencazelo ngezindlela eziningi. Kulolu cwaningo kukhethwe amaciko ayisithupha ukuba yingxenywe futhi kukhulunywe ngawo. Iqembu lokuqala belihlanganisa u*Steven Cohen*, u*Wezile Mgibe*, no*Carin Bester*, abaqokwe ngenxa yomsebenzi wabo ophawula ngezindaba zenhlalo kanye nezimpahla zokugqoka. Iqembu lesibili belino*Mary Sibande*, u*Yinka Shonibare*, no*Nandipha Mntambo* bona abaqokwe ngenxa yemisebenzi yabo kanye nokusebenzisa kwabo izimpahla zokugqoka emisebenzini yabo yobuciko eyahlukene. Lapha kubanjwe izinkulumongxoxo zamaqembu njengendlela yokuqala yokuqoqwa kwedatha yalolu cwaningo ukuze kuqala kuhlaziywe imilayezo nezincazelo zemisebenzi yamaciko ayisithupha akhethiwe. Okwesibili, ukuze kutholakale ukuthi abukho yini ubudlelwano phakathi kwezinhloso zamaciko kanye nezincazelo zezibukeli, kanjalo nokuthola umthelela wezimpahla zokugqoka ekukhombiseni ubuciko njengendlela yokwakha isiko kusetshenziswa izincazelo ezahlukene. Lolu cwaningo luveze ukuthi ukwakheka kwesiko ngokwezimpahla zokugqoka kuhunyushwa ngendlela ehlukelele uma kusetshenziswa ubuciko, kuhlanekezela ukuziphatha okungabekezelelani emphakathini nokuchema okudaleka emphakathini.

Ucwaningo luphinda futhi luncome ukuba kwenziwe ukulandelela okuhloswe ngakho ukuba kukalwe futhi kuqinisekiswa umthelela odalekayo ngenxa yobuciko obenziwayo njengendlela yokudlulisa umlayezo emphakathini mayelana nokuguqulwa komphakathi.

AMAGAMA AMQOKA:

Umsiko wengqephu; imvunulo; ubuciko obubukwayo; ukudlulisa umlayezo ngengqephu; itiyori yobuhle obungefaniswe; ubuhle bobudlelwane; u*Steven Cohen*; u*Wezile Mgibe*; u*Carin Bester*; u*Mary Sibande*; u*Yinka Shonibare*; u*Nandipha Mntambo*.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Clothes have a major impact on social influence, and their characteristics as cultural objects influence both the wearer and social community, individually and collectively. Perceptions and orientations concerning clothing generate a plethora of issues in social interaction. The visual impact of clothing in relation to assimilation is employed by performance artists to communicate various social concerns and issues, influencing the viewers as social commentary in their creative practices. Clothes can be interpreted as cultural symbols and can inevitably be provocative; hence, performance artists find them effective visual tools of expression. Thus, in this study, costumes and dress codes are used interchangeably with clothing, clothes, dress/dresses/dressing, and garments. Dress codes encompass coded social or cultural meanings associated with certain types of clothing that are accepted to be worn by different genders or children per cultural group or in specific circumstances and at various cultural events, including various types of uniforms. Costumes, conversely, refer to clothes, garments, dress/dresses/dressing and clothing in general.

This study highlights the importance of clothing as a means for cultural construction and interpretation, sometimes leading to controversial judgments in creative practice. It emphasises the value of performance costumes in social commentary art. Its aim is to present the diverse and open-ended interpretation and meaning of clothing through the theory of the sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics. It also underlines the impact of performance costumes as effective tools for critiquing socio-political and other various social issues. Viewers individually and collectively interpret the holistic meaning of the performance within their own perceptions and perspectives. This results in multifaceted interpretations to open-ended meanings due to the dramatised representation of messages. This is because the construction of meaning depends on the prior knowledge, values, and morals of the viewers if they relate to the message the performance carries through the chosen costumes and accompanying accessories. Thus, the viewers interpret the meaning of the performance from their own perspectives and costumes, in particular, carrying various connotations.

The theory of the sublime is used in this study to articulate various interpretations and meanings associated with performance costumes and clothing as cultural symbols. According to Burke (1990: 67) "infinity is the truest test of the sublime". The meanings and interpretations of performance costumes and clothes in general are in this study articulated using the sublime theory enhanced by denotative and connotative explanation. Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics is described as the aesthetics of sharing, and inter-human exchange in which art is viewed as a collective elaboration of meaning that allows for exchange and reflection. Thus, relational aesthetics is relevant in articulating the relationship between the performing artist's intentions in choosing the costumes and accessories and how the viewer interprets and assigns meaning to the entire performance.

Selected works by artists Steven Cohen, Carin Bester, Wezile Mgibe, Yinka Shonibare, Nandipha Mntambo, and Mary Sibande formed the subject of this study. Steven Cohen, Carin Bester and Wezile Mgibe were interviewed as the elite informants to unpack their choice and use of costumes in their performance art, thus making them both the subject and informants of this research due to their artistic expressions that utilise clothing and accessories as a major aspect of their subject-matter. Secondary research focused on the works of artists Mary, Sibande Yinka Shonibare, and Nandipha Mntambo, who were chosen due to their prominent use of costumes in their sculptural installation projects. A selection of their work forms part of this research as subjects to support this study's argument that clothing/costumes are effective tools for critiquing socio-political narratives, and other various social issues.

Focus group interviews were carried out to discover the relationship between performing artists, viewers' interpretations as well as clothing as cultural constructs with diverse meanings. Analysis was also conducted of documents such as catalogues, newspaper articles and social media platforms commenting on social issues related to performance costumes and general dress codes, were also conducted. The emergent data were interpreted to articulate the significance of clothing in defining new norms and habits and when they are used as objects of expressive art.

The study proffers that performance costumes, in this context, can be viewed as creative elements that draw from and manipulate existing cultural predisposition as a mechanism for expression and intended impact. Jessica Bugg (2009:27) shares this view in her own research where she designed performance costumes for a creative production and interviewed both performers and audience members. She referred to performance costumes as “concept-led fashion” and performance as “clothing-based work”. She further made the point that “the viewers’ reading of clothing-based work in context is complicated, and readings are mediated through a process of association, emotional responses, and personal understanding of the body, clothing, and the effect of context” (Bugg, 2009: 27). She also asserted that the clothing “has the potential to become fully integrated” in the performance in “the context of the final communication” (Bugg, 2009: 27-30).

This study analyses and interprets a selection of performative artistic discourses with special emphasis on the impact of the costumes/clothing used in enhancing the expressions as a means of social commentary juxtaposing with similar clothing issues in the social environment. This was done through interviews, observations, and the employment of the sublime theory, which was enhanced by denotative and connotative explanations of meaning. Interpretations are drawn from semiotics and symbolic communication of appearance as a mechanism for creative expression. Non-probability sampling was followed in the selection of the artists who frame this study’s argument and the collection of authentic data. The study sought to discover the meanings and interpretations of performance costumes elucidating an in-depth understanding of the role clothing plays in the selected visual artworks or performances.

1.1 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This thesis consists of six chapters. It seeks to present and support the argument that clothes can be regarded as provocative cultural symbols and, when used by performance artists, they become effective visual tools of expression in social commentary art. Chapter One presents an introduction, highlighting the significance, scope, and contextual background of the study and introduces the general layout of how the research is presented to make a cohesive argument. Chapter two presents the literature review and theoretical framework. The literature review unpacks the

historical development of clothing as cultural constructs, arguing that performance costumes are mechanisms for artistic expression. This chapter also presents the theoretical framework that underpins the study, advancing theories of the sublime and relational aesthetics in explaining the impact of clothing as cultural objects and their impact when used in artistic performance. It further engages the value of semiotics and symbolic communication of appearance as an expression mechanism.

Chapter three articulates the methodology and procedures used in the study, and the criteria followed in selecting the chosen artists images and the motivation for using focus group interviews as a supplementary method of data collection. Chapter four presents the results of the study based on the findings of the primary data collected from interviews with Steven Cohen, Carin Bester, Wezile Mgibe, as well as analyses of the secondary data through focus group interviews from a selection of works of Yinka Shonibare, Mary Sibande and Nandipha Mntambo. In Chapter five, an interpretation of the results using semantic and content analysis on the emergent data is presented. Chapter six presents a conclusion and recommendations that highlight the relationship between clothing and accessories when they are used in artistic expressions and in social commentary art.

1.2 CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In South Africa, incidents of violence against women are widespread. There is also a common occurrence where women are victimised based on decoded interpretation of dressing as “indecent”. Several cases can be cited on this issue. However, the assault of Ms Nwabisa Ngcukana serves as a prime example. Ms Ngcukana (Figure 1.1) was sexually assaulted in 2008 and paraded around naked at a taxi rank by a group of men and taxi drivers at the Noord Taxi Rank, in Johannesburg, South Africa. According to her assailants, Ms Ngcukana was supposedly ‘inappropriately’ dressed, thus attracting their decided social punishment. The attack, which was captured on camera, sparked widespread outrage, with several groups and prominent personalities staging a march through the city centre of Johannesburg and eventually passing in front of the Noord taxi rank.



Figure 1.1: Young Woman after the attack. (Mogaki, 2008).

The former Gauteng Premier Nomvula Mokonyane raised her concern by condemning a similar attack which involved the harassment and groping of two teenage girls for wearing miniskirts, an incident which likewise occurred at the Noord Taxi Rank in Johannesburg. According to Sibanyoni (2008), due to the widespread outrage, the South African National Taxi Council (Santaco) formally apologised to Ms Ngcukana a day before South Africa commemorated Women's Day. Ngcukana responded to this gesture by stating that "it was just a verbal apology". The taxi association maintained that the guilty drivers did not belong to the association.



Figure 1.2: Young Woman being attacked and sexually assaulted by a group of adult males. (2012).

In 2012 another disturbing incident occurred near the same Noord Taxi Rank when a crowd of adult males attacked a woman, again for wearing a miniskirt. The assault was captured by CCTV cameras (Figure 1.2). Molatlhwa (2012:8) stated that the incident was reminiscent of the attack almost four years prior when Nwabisa Ngcukana was stripped of her clothes and sexually molested for the same reasons.

Similar incidents were reported in Kenya in 2014. According to Malm (2014), a woman had been standing at a busy bus stop in Nairobi's Central Business District when the men attacked her, later telling the local media that she had been 'tempting' them by being 'indecently dressed' in a miniskirt. Like Ms Ngcukana and Ms Molatlhwa, she was stripped and beaten by a group of men. The attack was filmed (Figure 1.3 [screen grab picture]) and shared on social media and unsurprisingly, outrage followed.



**Figure 1.3: A Young Woman being stripped naked in public by a group of adult males.
(Kamau, 2014)**

In all these cases, the women who were assaulted were not seen as victims by their attackers. Rather, they were perceived as the perpetrators and blamed for allegedly tempting them by being indecently dressed.

When performing (musical) and visual artists are purposely dressed in what these communities would term 'indecent' or wear controversial clothes (costumes) in their performances, they usually do not receive similar responses of outrage from the viewers. In fact, they are regarded as celebrities, as can be seen in Figures 1.4 to 1.7. This means that contexts/environments and or different classes of patrons interpret and respond to clothes differently. For example, when a girl or woman is wearing a mini skirt or shorts at an up-market mall, no one bothers, and this is considered a norm as there has been no intimidation incident reported in this type of environment. A reference can be made as seen in figures 1.9, 1.10 and 1.11, where a teenage girl is referred to as belonging to "Ama 2000", meaning she was born after the 1990s, during the 2000s and is seen dressed in a cut to almost nothing denim pants. Such scenes are common in these up-market spaces throughout African towns or suburbs (Malm 2014, Mogaki & Sibanyoni 2008). It seems they are acceptable when they happen in these spaces. Another observed scenario is that of cultural activist Thando Mahlangu, who was told to leave the mall due to his Ndebele traditional dress code (Figure 1.8).

With so many other non-referenced scenarios similar to the accounts presented above, it is obvious that clothing carries various meanings and can be interpreted differently in various contexts. When used in performance art, the interpretation is even more diverse due to the interface between the physical body (the performer), the clothing as well as the viewer's interpretation of the message being conveyed. Thus, when they are used in a performance, they may give rise to meanings, opinions, and interpretations ranging from normal, standard, alternative, controversial or even offensive depending on the target market and the viewer. Often, these different meanings, interpretations and opinions are borne through socially conceived predispositions. These artistic expressions often depict, create, change, and trigger societal changes.

Some of these artistic expressions address social and sensational issues, while others create provocative meanings, opinions, and interpretations. For example, Zanele Muholi used a wraparound piece of cloth (Figure 1.4) in a manner that suggested an intense sexual moment, provoking the viewers' attention to see this act as normal, making a controversial social commentary to effect a change in the way the society views LGBTQA+.



Figure 1.4: Zanele Muholi, Innovation Women Exhibition 2010

Sometimes, when performing artists use certain clothes, even if they are misunderstood, they are still accepted as sending a message even if some viewers see the act as a taboo. The interpretation of the action is expanded by the perception as a work of art communicating a message even if it uses something that is viewed as taboo. For example, when the former South African Minister of Art and Culture, Ms Lulu Xingwana, stormed out of an exhibition before making a scheduled speech because she interpreted Muholi's exhibition (which included the artworks in Figure 1.4) as homophobic and unconstitutional. The minister was perceived as ignorant of artistic expression by the artists' community and not fit to be the minister of art and culture.

These types of misunderstandings and controversial interpretations inform the rationale that this study seeks to highlight clothing as imbued with various and controversial meanings and interpretations, in different contexts, including when used in artistic expression. As such, this research broaches the question of dress code and, more specifically, its impact on artistic expression and the viewers' response. It argues that viewers' response is influenced by their cultural predispositions which are sometimes controversial and may affect the performing artist's messages adversely. It is, however, important to stress that both the costumes and the communicative actions relayed through the artistic performance carry equal weight and reciprocate each other in effectively conveying the message. In this view, performance costumes

are a major part of artistic expression. Without them, the performance may not relay the message it is meant to.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Soon after the ushering in of the democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, the country witnessed heightened levels of expression of newly found freedom by various groups. Besides politically inclined groups and individuals, artistic expressions became a major part of social commentaries by South African artists. As expected, some of these expressions were met with rejection by predominantly conservative societies for a number of reasons, including principles that were for and against both apartheid and the democratic government. Apartheid was built on the foundation of conservatism, stereotypes, and fear of the unknown. As such, when youthful artists/musicians put together a group called *Boom Shaka* (Figure 1.5) which came onto the scene and gained popularity, the country was split regarding the interpretation of their dress code. Most people saw *Boom Shaka* as an epitome of newly found freedom and artistic excellence, while others felt offended by, amongst other things, their dress code. The group became a euphemism for a social character of entertainment and obscene lifestyles allegedly led by the youth of the time (Malada, 2012). The controversies surrounding *Boom Shaka's* dress code was between those who saw it as decadent while others saw it as an expression of youthfulness and artistry. However, we cannot tell whether the group was itself promiscuous or leading a reckless lifestyle. Their dance moves and outfits were only seen among adults as being indecent. Most parents did not approve of their children emulating the dress code and dancing style of the group. Nonetheless the group enjoyed popular support among the youth. Miniskirts, "stomach-out" crop tops, long hair for girls and boots (mainly brown), big-pocketed jeans, shirts and belts hanging, and funny haircuts and colours for boys became fashionable. Teenagers could be found on the streets dancing and imitating *Boom Shaka*. It was undoubtedly a time of extreme popularity for the group.



Figure 1.5: The late Lebo Mathosa of Boom Shaka, performing at a Missy Elliot concert (Shivambu, 2005).

Malaga (2012) views Boom Shaka as a sexy Kwaito group that used dance moves (Figure 1.6) to invoke a type of female sexuality that many find degrading, and their skimpy outfits continued to fuel the debate between liberation and degradation. Their entertaining musical talent and sexy dance moves, notwithstanding, came to be referred to as a *Boom Shaka* generation, and was not meant as a compliment. It was demeaning and meant that the generation of youth led a lifestyle of nudity, hyper-sexual activity and overindulgence in entertainment. It was a term used to refer to the disrespectful and it represented the decline of morality in society.



Figure 1.6: The late Lebo and Thembi in traditionally inspired costumes. (Pillay & Herimbi, 2019).

The conservatives saw *Boom Shaka's* dress code as an expression of youths who had lost touch with reality and turned their backs on their South African traditions.

Some of these controversies were, on the one hand, informed by Christian values and African traditions on the other. The views informed by the Christian dogmas are quite self-evident. However, the criticism against *Boom Shaka's* traditional African dress code is not that self-explanatory (Figure 1.7). Christians are known for their stance against any form of dress code that seems to be 'too revealing' in favour of more conservative and 'respectful' ways of dressing. Traditionalists, on the other hand, sometimes disfavour anything that seems to be glorifying 'Western' modernity and, particularly, things that are glaringly non-conformist, which makes people look defiant to acceptable local societal norms and values. These perspectives, however, contravene perpetuated histories and traditional projections of South Africa that proffer that young people (and sometimes even adults) walked almost completely naked as a sign of purity (Bryant (1949). Bryant (1949: 121) gave native accounts where he explained the significance of nakedness during Zulu rites of passage, where young girls parade half naked with bare breasts and a short skirt called *Isidiya* similar to those worn by Boom Shaka in Figures 1.5 and 1.6 In this light, the artistic dress code of groups such as Boom Shaka are similar to the traditional ones and should not be seen as displaying lack of respect for African culture, norms, and values. Thembi's performance, however (as depicted in Figure 1.7), might still be interpreted by some as a lustful act.



Figure 1.7: Thembi and Theo performing in concert. (Sowetan live, 2016).

Artists give a voice to the voiceless and provide them with avenues that project their views as much as those of the artist to the society. Artists also express the general

views of their society for others to assimilate or observe. They act as mouthpieces in service of social awareness and reflect a broader consciousness embedded in a specific era.

This study draws from the theory of the Sublime. The Oxford English Dictionary (2014) defines the word Sublime as an adjective that is used to describe something of “very great excellence”; or a noun that denotes an “overwhelming sense of awe or other high emotion through being vast or grand”. Shaw (2006: [sp], emphasis in original) states that “broadly speaking, whenever experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear, then we resort to the feeling of the sublime”. At the same time Costello (2012:2) argues that the Sublime “at its etymological heart, carries the long history of the relationship between human beings and those aspects of their world that excite in them particular emotions, powerful enough to evoke transcendence, shock, awe, and terror”.

Consequently, this study proffers that a dress code carries a deeper meaning with a much bigger impact on society in all aspects of its actuality and functionality. The aim is to encourage the creation of an environment where society is prepared to be open-minded and to begin to asking questions about our dress codes. This is aimed at seeking answers that are divorced from prejudice and preconceived ideas about those perceived to be different. This study intends to provoke a dialogue culled from dress codes/costumes as products of a multitude of meanings and interpretations that may affect the message conveyed by performance artists.

1.4 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to highlight the importance of costumes/clothing as a means for cultural construction and interpretation. It makes the point that interpretation of clothing/costume sometimes leads to considering their value in enhancing the message performance artists are conveying in social commentary art. Its overarching aim is to discern whether culturally conceived perceptions about the meaning and interpretation of a costume affect the message a performance artist is conveying. Its main objective is to answer the question of whether the performance can convey the same message in social commentary art without the performer’s chosen costume. In

this, the costume becomes a vital element of the actualisation of the art work. It presents the diversity and open-mindedness of interpretations and meanings of clothing by using Burke's (1990) concept of the Sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics. The study endeavours to underline the power of performance costumes as effective tools for critiquing socio-political narratives/programmes and other various social issues.

1.4.1 Research Questions

- a) What is the impact of the performance costumes as elements of cultural expression?
- b) Do clothing/costumes relay similar messages and interpretations when used in artistic performances and in social and cultural environments?
- c) To what extent does the performance costume influence the interpretation of the artwork/performance created?
- d) What tools of agency do the material contexts with and through dressing actualise the potential influence of clothing as culturally constructed symbols?

1.5 RESEARCH SCOPE

The focus of this study is theoretical and does not result in an exhibition. It focuses on analysing and interpreting a selection of social commentary artistic expressions with emphasis on how costumes used by the performance artist enhances the message being relayed to the viewers, whilst juxtaposing this with similar clothing issues in the social environment. The field work was carried out through interviews and observations of performances/artworks. The theory of the Sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics are used in this study to articulate various interpretations and meanings associated with performance costumes and clothing as cultural symbols. Purposive sampling was used to select the chosen artists as key informants or their works as critical objects/subjects of this study's objectives. This is because it aligns with intentional selection of participants based on their knowledge and experience to inform the research accordingly.

Three artists, Steven Cohen, Carin Bester and Wezile Mgibe were directly interviewed as the key informants. The interviews focused on means to discover and understand their conceptualisation of the messages their works sought to convey with particular

interest in their choice of costumes and accessories in their performance art. Another group of three artists, Mary Sibande, Nandipha Mntambo and Yinka Shonibare and their use of dress codes/costumes in their sculptures/installations were critiqued by analysing a selection of their works by the focus groups. The focus group discussion was a selection of ordinary people (students who have not studied art) who were gathered in a room and discussed and analysed the selected performance pieces and sculptures/installations. This was done to discover the impact of culturally embedded beliefs about clothing/costumes when viewing artistic expressions.

1.6 THE RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Dressing is a powerful form of self-expression. When artists choose to use clothes as their primary medium, they are incorporating a deeply personal and symbolic element into their work. This is a fascinating and thought-provoking approach to their creative engagement, as it provides a unique perspective on the intersection of art and dressing. By focusing on dressing/clothing, artists are able to explore and convey complex themes such as identity, culture, societal norms and so on. Dressing holds a significant meaning and can serve as a reflection of our inner thoughts and emotions. When artists use dresses/clothes as their main medium, they are able to tap into this symbolism and create thought-provoking pieces that resonate with a wide audience. Furthermore, using clothing and accessories in their art allows for an exploration of form. The way in which clothes are used can add depth and texture to the artwork, creating an immersive and tactile experience for the viewers.

The rationale of this study is presented in two parts to coin the importance of this research to shed light on problematic social excepted constructs. The first part presents controversial cases where dressing was viewed in completely different ways due to social spectacle's cultural beliefs about the wearer which is sometimes associated with social class. This seeks to present how cultural dynamics associated with norms and values can be misused or misrepresented to exercise power dynamics and scapegoats for wrongdoing. The second part represents the personal motivation of the researcher in undertaking such a topic. Both rationales argue for the need for modern society to rise above double standards and accept personal freedom and respect for various freedoms of choice. The personal rationale presents my interest in this subject while simultaneously expanding on my previous research of *S'khothane*

culture. *S'khothane* refers to spontaneous township entertainers who strive for dress standards as social influencers. The previous study argued that the township *S'khothane* culture had become a popular spectacle synonymous with the entertainment performative artists bequeath through their artistic professional practice.

1.6.1 The General Rationale

Often, the dress code an individual subscribes to has a lot to say about the wearer, where they come from, who they are and what they do. According to the *Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary* (2018), the term “dress code” is defined as an accepted way of dressing for a particular occasion or in a particular social group. It dates back to the early nineteenth century, when students and the working class were disciplined to bear with the demands of capitalism, industrialisation, and national state formation (Memon 2021). In several contexts, the use of a dress code aimed to instil uniformity that likewise brought about ease of recognition. However, Frantz Fanon (1967:35) defines dress code as the way people dress, in their traditional attire that their custom implies, constituting the most distinctive form of a society’s uniqueness, the one that is most immediately noticeable. There are also many artists who make use of costumes and dress codes as tools for cultural construction to express various phenomena of their lived experiences but generally make a comment on societal issues. The use of costumes and dress codes as tools for cultural construction can be approached from a multitude of perspectives, especially when associated with artistic meaning, hence this study’s contribution to the existing discourse on this topic.

The 24th of September is a public holiday and marks the celebration of cultural heritage in South Africa. Various cultural groups observe this day by wearing their respective cultural dress codes. Due to the convergence of culture and acculture, there are a number of controversial issues relating to the binary between traditional and modern clothing. For example, the traditional Nguni cultural clothing such as *isigege*, *inciyo*, *thethana* (girls’ minimal dress code of a little cover on the genitals with the neck decorated with beaded necklaces), and the *isinene* and *isibhetshu* (young men’s genital and buttocks covers made from cowhide) are technically very minimalistic in how they cover the body, but within their proper and intended context are fully acceptable as cultural clothes. Nonetheless, there have been, in recent years, distressing reports of young women who were stripped of their clothes and beaten at

taxi ranks in KwaZulu-Natal, specifically for wearing shorts/hot pants or miniskirts with a blouse or a T-shirt with cleavage covering most parts of their bodies as compared to *inciyo* and *isibhetshu* which are accepted traditional Nguni clothing for young women and men. Thus, this study seeks to critique the misrepresentation of cultural dynamics associated with dress codes within modern society.

In 2021 a cultural activist Thando Mahlangu (figure 1.8), was ordered by a Boulders Shopping Centre manager (in Midrand) to leave the mall to wear the Ndebele traditional dress that is composed of an animal skin headband, underwear similar to the modern man's underwear that completely covers both the genitals and buttocks, a colourful long cape/throwover, and carrying a stick. According to Mpho Sibanyoni (2021), the incident was captured by his girlfriend and business partner, Nqobile Masuku, using a cell phone. In the recorded footage (Figure 1.8), the centre manager, who is a black African, is seen telling Mahlangu that he does not condone his outfit and that he must leave the mall.



Figure 1.8: Cultural activist Thando Mahlangu is being told to leave the mall due to his Ndebele traditional dress code (Sibayoni, 2021).

The manager continues to tell Mahlangu that the mall is a public place, and since he is indecently dressed, he must leave the mall. Mahlangu argued that the African attire he was wearing was appropriate because it covered him well; he was also wearing a face mask, as this was during the time of COVID-19, and he was not exposing his private parts. However, he was forced to leave the mall.

During his interview with SowetanLIVE (One of the South African newspapers), Mahlangu explained that after the confrontation with the shopping centre manager, they walked to a Clicks store at the same mall, and a security guard came to them as they were entering the door and told them (him and his companions) that he was not welcomed at the mall because he is harassing customers with his attire. This security guard told him that by exposing his underwear as the cape was opened in the front, he would chase away customers. As a result, he was not allowed to shop at the mall. After the confrontation, Mahlangu refused to leave and told the security guard to call the person who instructed him that he must tell him to leave the mall, attracting even more attention from other shoppers. After the exchange of words with the manager, the security guard was ordered to walk him out of the mall (Sibanyoni 2021).

This incident led to some black Africans demonstrating/protesting outside the Boulders Shopping Centre in Midrand, South Africa, in reaction to this manager's action. As a result of the public outcry, the Boulders Shopping Centre management issued a media statement apologising to Mr Mahlangu. The Centre clarified that it does not deny entry based on appearances and clothes and that it neither has no intention of hurting or discriminating against anyone based on their cultural beliefs and practices. In addition, they stated that what happened in the video does not represent the core beliefs and values of the centre (Sibanyoni 2021).

Recently, in another incident, an young lady, referred here as Ama2000, popularly known as 2k (Figure 1.9), left jaws-dropping, and gained instant fame at another shopping centre due to her dress , which was even more revealing than the one Mahlangu wore. In this image, she is seen as the centre of attraction, with bystanders taking photos of her while posing for the cameras with confidence and smiling.



Figure 1.9: A Young Women dress code choice caused a stir among people at the Mall (Mapakisha Black Gold/ Facebook 2022).



Figure 1.10: A Young Woman was followed outside the shopping centre because of her outfit (Mapakisha Black Gold/ Facebook 2022).

The lady was dressed in long pink braids, a crop top and cut denim with only strings remaining to cover her genitals, waist and G-string back, exposing her buttocks. The irony is that this style of dressing which is common among South African youth born after the year 2000, referred to in slang language as Ama-2000 or Generation Z, is an adaptation from modern clothing, but it is also similar to *inciyo* and even more revealing than hot pants and miniskirts, however in this environment, it seems to be acceptable.

This Ama-2000 lady, who also had tattoos on her thighs, grabbed the attention of customers, who eventually followed her around while chuckling and taking pictures and videos of her. According to Sifiso Naile (2022), it was unclear at which shopping centre this dramatic scene took place (Figure 1.10). Based on these two incidents presented above, the Mahlangu and Ama-2000 ladies, it can be said that different spectacles and or a place attract different reactions.



Figure 1.11: A Young Woman becomes an instant celebrity because of her dress code (Mapakisha Black Gold/ Facebook 2022).

Another incident reported in the news was that of a young lady who was seen at a Johannesburg taxi rank wearing a very short traditional Ndebele skirt, a vest, and beaded accessories. She was carrying an *Itshoba* (a stick with an ox tail head usually carried by traditional healers). It was reported that she was greeted by the audience with exclamation such as *Makhosi* and *Camagu*, both are isiZulu and isiXhosa languages, respectively, acknowledging her with respect as a traditional healer. It is not clear whether she was really a traditional healer or a trainee, but due to the cultural symbol *Itshoba*, which is associated with traditional healing and ancestral spirits, she was greeted with respect in contrast to the other cases of young ladies wearing Western miniskirts mentioned earlier in this study.

In all these cases, the two ladies who were harassed at taxi ranks for wearing miniskirts, the other one dressed in a Ndebele miniskirt carrying a cultural symbol, and then the two incidences at the malls (Mahlangu and Ama-2000 lady) attracted different audience behaviours. The two ladies who were harassed at taxi ranks were said to have dressed indecently, while the one carrying a cultural symbol, in a miniskirt associated with Ndebele culture, was greeted with respect. Mahlangu was ordered to leave Boulders Shopping Mall because of his Ndebele traditional dress code, which was said to be revealing, thus indecent. However, the young lady, who wore even less body covering, was not ordered to leave the mall; instead, she was celebrated. These incidences confirm that dress is a powerful product of cultural construction, invoking different and controversial behaviours that are sometimes questionable, hence the need for this study.

Based on these scenarios presented in this study, it can be said that dress invokes different interpretations from the audiences due to the knowledge they bring, making them invaluable tools for social commentary art. They can be regarded as a non-verbal or visual means of communication, expressing individual or collective social standpoints. The incidents mentioned here demonstrate that when dress is deliberately used in an artistic expression, it can stimulate necessary public debates and influence people's beliefs, views, and opinions towards change. Thus, the impact of dress on artistic expression is significant and, as such, justifies further exploration.

1.6.2 Personal rationale

I grew up in KwaZulu-Natal, where a popular phrase, Ukuswenka or Umswenko, is used to draw attention to, place emphasis on, and make one mindful of the dress one chooses to wear. *Ukuswenka* or *Umswenko* refers to someone who is well-dressed or has elegant and or sophisticated taste in fashion – a dandy. The word is premised on the English word “swank”, which Sydney *The Oxford Dictionary* (2014) defines as “display(ing) one’s wealth and knowledge”. Often the dress code subscription becomes prevalent when people want to belong to a social group that gives them a sense of meaning, self-worth, belonging, identity, and recognition. This sense of meaning and belonging sparked my interest in conducting my previous study of the *S’khothane* dress code. The outcomes of the study were achieved through data collection, an exhibition and analyses of contemporary visual culture through artworks.

The *S’khothane* are ordinary people; they are not wealthy but strive to wear bright, colourful, and expensive clothes, thereby instilling among themselves a culture of “showing off”. *S’khothane* wears expensive clothes together with accessories such as gold teeth and watches to impress, show off, boast, and express or communicate their group ideologies while at the same time entertaining the community and becoming Township influencers. *S’khothane* found their unique identity from other sub-cultural groups such as *Swenkas* (*Umswenko*), *Sapeurs* (*La Sape*) and *Pantsula* – groups who also celebrate their identities through clothes. All these sub-cultural groups subscribe to expensive dress codes as their chosen form of expression to show off their status through performances. However, *S’khothane* took some of the elements, such as style of dress, performance and poise and modified it, subsequently introducing a new cultural formation through the dress code. In addition, the study demonstrated that *S’khothane*’s dress code had an influence on several contemporary visual artists, such as Kudzanai Chiurai, Jamal Nxedlana and Nontsikelelo Veleko, to mention a few, as their artworks portray various noticeable street groups identified through their various performance dress codes.

My previous research focused on the *S’khothane* formation from the viewpoint of artist commentary on their *ideology* and how the community perceives them as influencers. This research focused on representing the impact of dress in art production. It also

argued that they are cultural products imbued with different and sometimes controversial interpretations when adopted by artists, hence they enhance the message being conveyed. This is because they evoke audiences' various predispositions, making them invaluable tools for social commentary art. As such, the aim of the current study is to undertake a critical and broad discourse analysis on how this study's chosen artists have influenced the contemporary artistic discourse using dress in their various artistic expressions.

1.7 INTRODUCING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ITS RATIONALE

Burke's (1990) theory of the Sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics are used in this study to explain the multiplicity of meanings clothing carries. First, as culturally constructed products sometimes entrenched with seductive meaning and interpretation, and second, their role in enhancing the message the performative artist conveys. Both theories relate to the characteristic of greatness/multiple perspectives, including artistic aesthetic greatness, and are applied in this study to unearth the embedded meanings/beliefs in the selected works. The interpretation of the emergent meanings and beliefs is necessary to create a wider awareness towards change and to positively influence societal mindsets on various issues and concerns about clothing, their cultural significance as well as being provocative tools for artistic expression.

According to Gambino and Pulvirenti (2020), the concept of the sublime dates back to the 18th century when debates about what constitutes the sublime were contested based on contrasting viewpoints espoused by two philosophers, Immanuel Kant (1790) and Edmund Burke (1757).

The Kantian concept proposed that the sublime is supra-sensible and rooted in reason (Logos) rather than in the object, thus provoking a mental state of tension between nature and art. Edmund Burke's concept, on the other hand, conceived of the sublime as a bodily immersive experience, which we here define as "sensitive" sublime. In summary, Burke's view of the sublime was rooted in the senses and not in the power of reason, unlike Kant's. This debate disrupted the mainstream ideas of that time, unconsciously anticipating some of the recent neurasthenic acquisitions regarding the central role played by the sensory apparatus in the experience of beauty and the sublime (Gambino and Pulvirenti 2020:1).

Thus, Kant's concept of the sublime is linked to the idea that both beauty and sublimity are subjective ideas, while Burke proposes that both are objective, each consisting of distinct and different qualities. Other researchers (Gambino & Pulvirenti 2020, and Ishizu & Zeki, 2014) support this stating "this implies that the big difference between the experience of the beautiful on the one hand and the sublime on the other relies on the involvement of different emotions" (Gambino & Pulvirenti 2020: 2). "What both experiences have in common is that they may be triggered as well by nature as by art through the activation of the imagination..." (Ishizu & Zeki, 2014). This argument supports the activation of the imagination from a thought's point of view, as thoughts cannot be separated from behaviour since behaviour is a reaction responding to what the viewer knows, which is, in this case, cultural knowledge. Burke's view of the sublime, which is driven by the spectator's senses, is what frames this study and is used to analyse the performer and/or the artworks, deriving the interpretation of meanings by the beholder and ascertaining to what extent the artist's original intentions were conveyed.

Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics is also referred to as the aesthetics of sharing and inter-human exchange. This study refers to art as a collective elaboration of meaning that allows for the exchange of ideas and reflection between the artists and viewers. According to Bourriaud (1998:19), artists who embrace relational aesthetics in their works "involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her (the artist), and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together". Thus, relational aesthetics in performative art refers to how the artist makes use of mundane objects and actions, luring the viewers' attention to a dialogical action. In this way, dress as culturally constructed products enhance this relationship between the audiences and the messages being conveyed due to their accessibility within a social context. Bourriaud further explains that relational aesthetics is "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure from the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (Bourriaud 1998:113). Relational aesthetics positions an artist's constructed social experiences, critiquing a societal issue and converting it into an art product. Due to

the knowledge the viewers bring with them, which is informed by their individual and collective imagination, the artwork conveys multiple meanings and interpretations.

This study applies the concept of the sublime to analyse and interpret the multiplicity of meanings deduced by the viewers when confronted by a performative artwork. The multiplicity of meanings emanates from the different views that viewers already have when looking at the artwork, which may differ from the artist's original intentions due to the different cultural backgrounds. The chosen costumes play a major role in influencing the viewer as they enhance the message being conveyed. Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics further expands the interpretation of meaning by the viewers as the consumers of the artwork, as this experience invokes a predisposition that is culturally constructed. In fact, the performance artist interacts with the viewers who experience the performance, enhanced by the chosen costumes in response to the conveyed message through the artist's various other communication processes.

Concepts of sublime and relational aesthetics are used in explaining the social experience of creating and presenting art by an artist and consuming or appreciating it by the viewers to extrapolate the argument that costume can render the artwork with a multiplicity of meanings. Bourriaud (1998) perceives art as an "inter-human" exchange that transcends the art object to include the art producer as well as the art consumer. The performance captures the attention of the viewers, making them rethink and reflect on the issue at hand. These two concepts are unpacked in detail under the theoretical framework in chapter two.

The application of these theories is meant to unpack and understand viewers' perceptions regarding the selected artworks. This was done by juxtaposing the artist's espoused intention with the reactions of those who participated in the focus group interviews which form part of this study's data collection methods. Subsequently, a deduction was made in answering the questions of this study. These are to confirm the importance of performance costumes in social commentary art for the performer and the audience and in how the performance and aesthetic appreciation experiences are both enriched.

1.8 MOTIVATION FOR THE CHOICE OF ARTISTS INFORMING THIS STUDY

The selected visual artists or performances that inform this study were purposeful. They were selected to be both the subjects and informants of this research due to their artistic expressions that utilise clothing and accessories as major aspects of their subject matter. These are Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe, Carin Bester Yinka Shonibare, Athi Patra-Ruga and Mary Sibande. They were chosen due to their prominent use of costumes, framing this study's argument that performance costumes are effective tools for critiquing socio-political narratives and other various social issues.

Steven Cohen is a performance artist who is usually cross-dressed in striking outfits and accessories with ultra-sophisticated makeup, presenting his body as a scenographic object and creating theatrical live and or recorded performances in public spaces. Beginning with his own identity as a gay, Jewish, white, South African man, his work critiques stereotypes associated with gender, identity, socio-political and socio-economic issues. His use of costumes plays a very important role in his work, where he often appears wearing glittery facial accessories and heavy make-up with the unrealistic presentation of the dress code. He engages his viewers with irresistible, awe-inspiring aesthetic experiences with multiple meanings, sometimes due not only to the costumes and accessories he chooses but also in the locations of his performances. A selection of his performance work was analysed and interpreted by a group of participants to confirm this study's argument. In addition, Cohen's ability to communicate on several social problems and at any location made him a suitable participant for this research.

Wezile Mgibe is a visual artist who uses costumes to explore the narratives behind unwelcoming spaces and the dynamic of return and reintegration of identities in Southern Africa. He uses an interdisciplinary practice encompassing performance, visuals, and installation. His work challenges social inequality and promotes critical self-reflection in unwelcoming spaces influenced by historical events and the motivations behind movements and reactions. His work also confronts prejudices, advocates against social inequalities, and creates a platform for critical self-reflection within unwelcoming spaces. In addition, his artworks are influenced by how things

have come into existence as well as the motivations behind certain movements and reactions.

Performance artist, activist, and actress Carin Bester focuses on the issues of gender-based violence (GBV) and Femicide, as well as the oppression of women. She works extensively with durational performance, which takes place over an extended period of time in a gallery or other location, with viewers visiting the site to observe her performances. Carin uses costume and performance to draw public attention to issues and encourage people to advocate against Femicide, oppression of women and GBV actively. Bester's video productions depict the assassination of a woman in South Africa. Her activism in performance is documented in videos, combining excerpts, along with information about organisations, sanctuaries, and campaigns combating gender violence. Her performance costumes are used as tools for social commentary.

Nigerian-born artist Yinka Shonibare lives and works in London. He is a citizen of two nations, a double ambassador of previously asymmetrical ideological polarities of race and power: Nigeria and the United Kingdom, respectively. He explores cultural identity, colonialism, and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalisation. He creates sculptures, some dressed up in brightly coloured Ankara fabric that is associated with Africa, hence called African print fabric. Batik-wax-printed cotton is a fabric imported from the Netherlands but largely identified with West African textiles. He creates headless mannequins, an intended pun borrowed from the iconic style of execution during the French Revolution (Sontag 2009). Shonibare's work functions towards but is not quite fashioning authentic post-colonial, post-African independence dialogue, where justice and liberty both mean freedom. His work presents an interplay of his mixed reality, addressing alienation and split personality between the fibres of a colonial fabric.

Nandipha Mntambo is a visual artist, sculptor, videographer, and photographer known for her cowhide sculptures. Her sculptures are moulded from her own figure, as she uses her body as the anchor point to make connections to cattle in African, European, and Asian beliefs and customs.

South Africa is an interesting space where freedom of expression is very important but equally remains a contested issue. The space for tolerance and activism within the arts is expanding, although also being met with resistance within some circles. Artists are creating work that challenges viewers in ways that make it difficult for their voices to be left unheard. This challenge encourages discussion and the confrontation of the issues that affect us as individuals and as a society in general. This debate and discussion is sorely needed for the development of our country (Nandipha Mntambo 2014)

She sculpts cowhide around a mould that was initially formed from her body, wearing cowhide as a tunic, sewing cow hair through paper, staging bullfights (with a cowhide cape), or staging herself as a bull.

Mary Sibande is a sculptor, photographer, and visual artist who uses costume to represent black female domestic workers as not only entwined with oppressive structures but also crucial to their very economic existence. Sibande critiques stereotypical depictions of women as domestic workers, particularly black women in South Africa, through photography and sculptural installation. The body and costume are the sites where history is contested, and Sibande's fantasies can play out. She tenders a transformation of the abject and charges the image of the female body with repurposed and refreshingly unpredictable ambiguities. She makes use of costume to demonstrate her ideas of changing and the construction of an identity in a postcolonial South African context. She critiques stereotypical depictions of black women and, in particular, as domestic servants.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the literature review and theoretical framework to support the argument made in this study. The literature review presents the historical development of clothing first as body protectors and, secondly, as cultural constructs, arguing that when clothing or performance costumes and accessories are used, they enhance the message the artist is conveying. A review of various arguments from sources that deal with clothing as cultural objects and as mechanisms for performance art is presented. It discusses performative art costumes that influence culture and social practice. The chapter also discusses dress as a tool for cultural and sub-cultural construction. Theories of the sublime and relational aesthetics are unpacked, advancing the impact of clothes as cultural objects and their influence when they are used in artistic performance.

Bourriaud's (2002) *Relational Aesthetics* gives ideas on the use of art and artworks in society to open discussions and dialogue as people relate to these elements in their everyday lives. Lorenc's (2018) *Aesthetic Participation as a Realisation of Social and Cultural Poesies* was a valuable source for this research, as discusses how people's involvement in art impacts their social and cultural lives. This is echoed in Sztabinnska's (2018) *Performance and Participatory Art*, which talks about the relationship between the two as it relates to people taking part in events. These sources and others help form a literary background for the research in understanding clothing as the key element of this study.

2.1 EVOLUTION OF CLOTHING

Clothes can be said to be infused with a set of standards and rules that regulate an individual's appearance. These standards and rules are influenced by social perceptions and norms, and they vary based on purpose, circumstances, and occasions where the clothing is used. The stricter definition of clothing is associated with a massive state of homogeneity and uniformity of populations that began in the early nineteenth century. During this period, workers and employees were disciplined to meet the demands and standards of capitalism, industrialisation, and national state formation (McVeigh, 2000:232). Rucker, Anderson, and Kangas (1999:59-77) expand the definition of dress code to not just the clothing but to include adornments,

accessories, hairstyles, beading, piercings and tattooing complementing them and creating a unique look. In this section, the origins of dress codes and their cultural heritage are explored in a variety of forms influenced by religious beliefs, organisational and educational policies and practices.

Dressing has a long history in many societies. As part of their cultures, it serves different purposes, from the basic covering of the body to denoting cultural and class designations. Dressing or clothing also has political connotations, is influenced by various political ideologies, and can be a mechanism for protest. The origin of clothing has evolved from when people began making and wearing clothes to them being a symbol of status, class and discrimination. The initial function of clothing emanated from the need for people to regulate their body temperatures due to environmental and climatic conditions (Buckner, 2021:707). Unlike other animals on the land, people lack fur and heavy protective skin that can withstand extreme weather conditions. To meet these needs, they invented clothes to cover themselves according to the thermodynamics of their surroundings.

According to Buckner (2010:708), clothes were made from different raw materials in the early days, and people extracted the resources that were available near them to make clothing pieces that suited their purposes. These included animal skin, hides, wool, leaves, bark, fibre, branches, and other soft parts of plants. Over time, the type of clothing and how they are worn as clothing has become part and parcel of cultural identity and heritage. Different communities have distinct traditional attires to showcase and preserve their cultures. People widely embraced their traditional dresses as symbols of their identity. On the other hand, the clothing industry has evolved with the development of technology and machines that can convert raw materials into fabrics, advancing textile and clothing industries (Lennon & Burns, 2000:214).

2.1.1 Clothes as Body Protectors

The primary objective of clothing was to protect human bodies from a wide range of dangers or harm posed by various climatic conditions. Clothing, however, has been characterised as a vehicle for socialisation and social control and/or, alternatively, for liberation from sociocultural constraints. Communities and special groups such as war

and military operations have embraced the protective abilities of clothing which sometimes disguise them to avoid being seen by enemies, hence the colour of the military personnel (Buckner, 2010:718). Some of their clothes are also designed in special ways to withstand the dangers of weapons and other sophisticated equipment. This demonstrates the important role uniforms play in different workplaces (Craik, 2005:1; Crane & Bovone, 2006:320). Historical accounts reveal that societies around the world have always dictated different dress codes for men and women (Moorosi, 2012:181). However, modern society is becoming increasingly less rigid about dressing, and the individual self is being expressed mainly through clothing and having a fashion identity (Smith, 2016:1).

Crane and Bovone (2006:321) argued that clothes convey a close association with perceptions of the self when they are aligned with a form of material culture. In addition, Kuchler and Miller (2005:1) assert that “cloth and clothing are living, vibrant parts of culture and the body, from the recycling of cloth in Africa and India, and the use of pattern in the Pacific, to the history of ‘wash and wear’, and why women wear the wrong clothes to restaurants in London”. According to Rosenthal (2009:625), clothing assumed a central position in this ‘world in motion’ as they developed into complex social systems of dress codes, as textiles and trims were acquired in local, urban, and international markets. Individual identities were formed, no longer solely according to regional, economic, and political dictates but also in accordance with social, aesthetic, and industrialised processes that embraced both global techniques and individual preferences. Dressing is understood as elements of sign systems produced by historically specific material conditions, as each part of the system acted in different ways in negotiations between dominant groups and cultures and the lower levels of society (Rosenthal, 2009:530).

2.1.2 Clothes as Culturally Accepted Functional and Symbolic Objects

Apart from providing protection, clothes have become culturally accepted functional and symbolic objects. People have continued to use and advance dressing practices since their invention, to the point of making them part of their cultural practices as they serve functional and symbolic purposes in their lives (Buckner, 2010:717). Different communities developed clothing that suited their everyday lives from the resources available in their surroundings. Long-term use led to the formation of a dress culture

and guidelines on dress codes for men and women. This is in line with Lorenc's (2018) article, which describes how aesthetic participation leads to the realisation of social and cultural practices. According to Lorenc (2018:15), people interact with others and learn from being disinterested to actively participating in things within their settings. They embrace these elements based on how they help them in their daily lives and give them an identity. Dressing practices in local settings have led to cultures that recognise traditional clothes as part of their identity.

People living in groups develop guidelines on dressing practices to reflect gender, status, age, and demographics that shape their cultural and social lives. For example, Hansen (1994:100) describes how dealing with used clothing (*salaula*) in Zambia has led to the identity of the third republic. Some are traders who earn their living from selling these clothes, while those who buy aim to improve their wardrobes. Although these clothes have no use in the West, their value is revived in Zambia through selling or transforming them into new designs or products that suit buyer's needs. Locals have embraced these used clothing, leading to an identity that gives them opportunities to express themselves beyond traditional clothes.

Different cultures also defined their associations through dressing. Buckner (2010:718) discusses this in detail through the war or military groups and modesty covering, among other clothing pathways. When it comes to war, fighters develop a dressing culture that identifies them and disguises their operations. With camouflaged clothes, they can launch secret attacks on enemies by mimicking the background setting. In the case of modesty, people form clothing principles that guide how they dress. Women and men are expected to observe the dress codes accepted by their cultures to show decency, respect, and status. Some spiritual groups also use clothing identities to impersonate spirits and disguise their perceptions to others in society (Buckner, 2010:718). Dressing practices are accepted for their functionality and cultural identity, hence versatile and suitable for performance artistic expression that critiques societal concerns and issues.

Different societies around the world have unique ways of expressing their identity, traditions, and societal trajectories. One such method is through costumes and dress codes. The world is encapsulated in a myriad of cultures, each unique in its own right

but bound by a collective thread of respect and appreciation for diversity. Within these intricate webs of culture, costumes and dress codes hold immense significance as potent tools for cultural construction (Refinery 2018:29). These are not merely aesthetic attire but speak volumes about a society's traditions, beliefs, and values. Costumes, across cultures and geographical boundaries, are not just arbitrary garments chosen for physical comfort or representation of personal style but often carry profound societal implications (Hollander, 1995:13). They are, in essence, a living art form that narrates the unwritten stories of societies, reminiscent of a period, location, its societal structure, its symbolism, and spirituality.

Edmund Leach stated that the way society dresses not only differentiates it from others but also forms an integral part of its belief system and way of life, thus contributing immensely to cultural construction (Leach, 1993:11). Patricia Laurie Sunderland and Rita Denny, in their work, "Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research," further highlight the significance of costumes in consumer society, in how dressing serves as a site for the negotiation and articulation of cultural norms, values, and types of acceptable behaviour (Sunderland and Denny, 2007:106). Elizabeth Wilson, in her path-breaking work "Adorned in Dreams", describes dress as "codes and language" where one can read the cultural dynamics, social structures, psychological facets, and deep-rooted ideologies (Wilson, 2013:106).

Dressing has long played a pivotal role in the cultural construction and identity of various societies globally. This is particularly evident in the rich and diverse continent of Africa. In African societies, dress codes and costumes are intertwined with culture, history, and societal norms (Rovine, 2001:108). Dress codes carry a meaningful symbolism that narrates historical roots, tribal affiliations, social status and much more. They are not just pieces of fabric sewn together to shield individuals from the elements or to safeguard their modesty. They are intrinsic elements that contribute significantly to the cultural heritage and inscription of social codes in Africa.

Clothes act as key instruments in the African cultural construction, looking into their symbolic significance, cultural heritage, influence on gender & social hierarchy, and their role in contemporary African society. They signify various aspects of life, such as social status, religious beliefs, and communal ties (Rabine, 2002:ii). For instance,

the Maasai people of East Africa, renowned for their vibrant red blankets ('Shuka'), not only draw style but carry an inherent symbolism to their clan and warrior status (Kotowicz, 2013:29). In West Africa, the Aso-Oke hat, a traditional headgear worn by the Yoruba people of Nigeria, signifies prestige and high social standing (Makinde & Ajiboye, 2009:59). This costume is often used at marriage ceremonies, chieftaincy coronations and funerals. It is accepted as part of the societal attire, promoting cultural continuity and unity.

It is also a norm among Swahili women in the coastal regions of East Africa to dress in *Buibui* (a black garment which is a floor length cloak), and *Kanga* or *Leso* (coloured cotton cloths). Men wear a white kanzu (a white garment) and *Kikoi* (a striped cloth) predominantly to express modesty and alignment with Islamic values (Wairimu, 2022). Similarly, in Senegal, West Africa, the 'boubou' dress code is conventional among both men and women and signifies the collective identity of a community. This large flowing garment, often made from brightly coloured textiles, does not just highlight their artistic finesse but echoes communal harmony and respect for societal norms (Rabine, 2002:92).

Despite clothing and accessories being tools for cultural construction, dressing serve distinct roles in society. Performance costumes are iconic and symbolic, reflecting various rites of passage, socio-economic statuses and religious values in society. Dress codes, on the other hand, embody communal norms, practices and societal expectations, reinforcing group identity. Costumes highlight individuality and uniqueness, dress codes promote conformity and uniformity.

2.1.3 Dressing as a Mechanism of Artistic Expression

Dress codes have been used for artistic expression through the ages, and are used to convey and achieve artists' intention in communicating the messages while evoking viewers to interact and arrive at shared or individual meanings. Steven Cohen (2010), in the article "What Have Clothes Got to Do with It? Romantic Comedy and the Female Gaze", explores various artworks ranging from novels to films and other romantic comedy materials, giving a comprehensive perception of how actors are represented and the role of performance garments. Performance artists always endeavour to

create artworks for activism, appealing to viewers' attentive interaction in accessing the messages the artworks convey. Costumes, coupled with both the use of spoken words and nonverbal communication, play a critical role in enhancing the messages the performance is conveying. With the evolution and developments in technology, artists can now create better artworks by integrating text and images into live performance as well as in films (Cohen, 2010:85). Performance artists can express themselves through their artwork in ways they could not in real-life situations making their art more authentic. This is because the performance acts are usually driven by the subconsciousness with or without conscious knowledge of the performer.

The role of dressing in art has evolved as performance artists attempt to attain greater expression while challenging societal beliefs and practices. The use of clothing provides artists with opportunities to manipulate people's perceptions while encouraging them to participate in reciprocal dialogical action. According to Freire (2018), dialogical action refers to a reflective dialogue between the artist/performer and the audience, leading to transformative action. Performance art is valuable in art activism. The knowledge base that the viewers bring to their engagement with the artwork/performance is usually based on their lived experience along with cultural and genealogical transmission, making the visual narrative accessible and meaningful. Through participation, the viewers interact with performances, tapping into their individual and collective approaches to decipher and generate meaning.

Artists go beyond normal practices in performing acts with clothing styles that arouse discussion and reactions from the viewers. Artists can reach wide audiences, provoke their imaginations or feelings, and succeed in making their performances influential. They use various strategies to challenge social, cultural, and political lines as they draw the attention of viewers, inducing them to participate in consuming the performances (Lorenc, 2018:16). The utilisation of clothing offers a powerful mechanism for pushing established cultures and beliefs, and practices, making the performance accessible. People can emulate or be permissive toward less strict modes of dressing, courtesy of artwork and performances. This is especially so when artists integrate practices from real life into their performances as viewers can relate to and appreciate them.

Bourriaud (2002:41) advances aspects that influence artworks as elements of space-time exchanges, including the artwork itself and the subject of the artwork. He asserts that the elements of space-time exchanges are about the interactions an artist wants to achieve through his/her artworks, while the subject of the artwork is the message and meaning intended for the audience. Artists choose clothing styles that enable people to relate to the artwork, encouraging success. Dezeuze (2006:144) echoes that there is no difference between art and real life as the relational aesthetics and transfiguration of the commonplace observed in art attempt to describe everyday life. People can relate to what is in their surroundings. The artist's work is to draw their attention to what is around them. They are interested in exercising aesthetic autonomy to exercise democracy in their interactions with artworks to form their meanings (Ross, 2006:170). The use of clothing as an expression in art is a significant component in appealing to audiences and arousing their attention to things and practices in their surroundings.

2.2 PERFORMATIVE ART COSTUMES

Costumes and dress codes perform a critical function in African performative arts. They are more than visual spectacles. They are potent tools of social commentary effectively utilised to critique societal norms and values, stir conversations, and enact change. These costume expressions are an illustrative encapsulation of the continent's evolving cultural narratives, societal challenges, and communal aspirations. The power of clothing moves beyond the anonymous crowd into the spotlight of performative art. Performative artists keenly exploit the enormous potential of clothing to enhance their visuals, transformations, and overall narratives. The fluctuating character of their costume display is a strategic method to maintain audience engagement and offer a dynamic and immersive performance. The utilisation of clothing becomes part art, part psychology and part storytelling, evolving into something as dynamic as the performance itself. Burke's theory of the Sublime is instructive in demonstrating how clothing can construct or contribute to the narrative a performance artist wishes to convey.

The boundary between the audience and the performer becomes blurry in this interaction-driven context. The clothing of a performative artist strongly influences the interactive encounter. Each outfit transfers a different message, mood, and emotion

to the audience. Consequently, clothing can be seen as a medium enhancing the artist's narrative, magnifying the emotions stirred, and binding the audience to the performance.

Performance art elucidates how clothing operates as a cultural object. As a platform for artists' visions, costumes in performance art possess the potential to resonate, influence, and orient spectators' perceptions, leading to multi-layered interpretations. Understanding this necessitates the merging of the sublime's provocation of severe emotional responses and relational aesthetics' emphasis on context and relationship in the process of meaning-making. Further research in these domains may pave the way for more encompassing studies on the dynamic symbiosis between performance art and clothing.

Performative art takes a myriad of expressions and dimensions. In Africa, performative arts such as dance, music, and theatre have been essential cultural elements used to narrate the African story, embody communal values, and critique societal norms. Their costume and dress codes have served aesthetic purposes and utilised as tools for social commentary. This section further explains how costumes and dress codes have been employed as vehicles of social commentary in African performative arts. For example, the costumes and dress codes such as those used in the performances, from the intricate beadworks of the Zulu dance outfits to the vibrant Kente cloth worn in Ghanaian dance dramas, are fundamental to this critique and discourse.

2.2.1 Performative Costumes Influencing Culture and Social Practices

The use of clothing in performative art has other implications related to politics, culture, and sociological perspectives. Since art is influential in reaching people in many creative ways, performance art can be utilised to question certain stereotypes or critique societal exclusionary and inclusionary practices. One of the contemporary South African performance artists, Athi-Patra Ruga, uses dress to explore complex beliefs, creating a counter-narrative for the marginalised. Ruga describes his performances as challenging people's non-acceptance of differences in relation to structure, ideology and politics. He asserts that "performance art is about looking for the mundane in everyday life and augmenting it so that people can actually see the

art in it". He asserts that "I learnt to start using my issues to reach out and see if there is someone on the other side of the line" (Ruga:2015).

The Catalogue on 21 Icons Season 3 (2015) compiled by Adrian Steirn and produced by Ginkgo Agency gives an insightful and inspiring glimpse into Ruga's life and reveals the power of using performance art to explore and push boundaries between fashion, performance, and contemporary art to reach people of all colours and levels of social classes and breakdown their stereotypical views on race, sexuality, and gender identity. In one of his interviews, Athi-Patra Ruga stated that his artwork is centred around challenging ideas of social and national belonging. His art aims to disrupt normative notions of identity and belonging, pushing the boundaries of societal expectations. One of notable artwork by Athi-Patra Ruga is the *Beiruth* series (Figure 2.1), which embodies this disruptive approach by adopting camp and drag aesthetics. Drag aesthetics is believed to be driven by the artist/performer's inner instinct to build his/her self-esteem, aiming to lampoon social norms that look down on LGBTQ people towards speaking out loud about homophobic tendencies. The name "*Beiruth*" is said to have originated from a clever wordplay referencing the city of Beirut in the Middle East, which reflects the concept of Orientalism. However, its significance lies primarily in its representation of an enigmatic figure that distinguishes the autonomous entity from the sovereign state (Brodie/Stevenson 2008).

The *Beiruth* work showcases Ruga's interest in image-making, history and displacement of people and pictures. The performance's title refers to both the sexual practice of 'bug-chasing' (intentionally contracting the HIV virus) and the history of the 'Watussi', a colonial mispronunciation of the Burundi-Ruanda Tutsi people. Ruga believes that by using his own body as a canvas, he can challenge societal norms and stereotypes directly. He sees his body as a powerful tool for communication, allowing him to express complex narratives and explore themes of identity, gender, and belonging.



...the naivety of Beiruth 1



...the naivety of Beiruth 2

Figure 2.1: Athi-Patra Ruga, ...the naivety of Beiruth 1 & 2. (Stevenson 2008).

He stated that “the body is all you have; it’s the first point of call. You can take it down the streets and do whatever you want to do. I think that is something that runs through the veins of South Africans when it comes to performing” (21 Icons season three 2015). Ruga’s belief in the transformative power of disruptive art is grounded in its ability to challenge and subvert dominant narratives, allowing for alternative perspectives and voices to be heard.

Athi-Patra Ruga stands out as a dynamic and thought-provoking performer whose work has a significant influence on culture and social practice. His performances are characterised by his distinct choice of costumes and accessories, which add layers of meaning and commentary to his artistic expression. Ruga’s choice of costumes and accessories in his performances serves as a powerful tool to explore various aspects of culture and social practice. His attention to detail and creativity in crafting these visual elements allow him to convey messages and provoke critical thinking among his audiences.

In another one of his notable performances entitled “*Over the Rainbow*” (Figure 2.2), Ruga uses elaborate and vibrant costumes to challenge societal norms and expectations surrounding identity and gender. Ruga’s choice of costumes in “*Over the Rainbow*” is deliberate and impactful. The *Over the Rainbow* performance took

place at the Big Apple for Performa 17 Biennale in November 2016. The performance “*Over the Rainbow*” by Athi-Patra Ruga is a captivating and thought-provoking piece that explores themes of identity, gender, and societal expectations through the use of costumes and accessories. He strategically combines clothing materials, colours, and accessories to create visually captivating and symbolic outfits that push boundaries and challenge traditional notions of beauty and identity.

Ruga’s choice of accessories also plays a significant role in shaping the meaning and impact of his performances. In “*Over the Rainbow*,” Ruga adorns himself with elaborate and ornate headpieces, masks, and jewellery. These accessories serve as symbols and representations of power, transformation, and identity. In addition, Ruga’s use of accessories also creates a sense of theatricality and spectacle, drawing the audience’s attention and engaging them in his performance.

Makube (2016) stated that in “*Over the Rainbow*,” Ruga adeptly employs a combination of classic and modern elements, as well as personal and political themes, to skilfully craft his narrative. *Over the Rainbow* also builds upon the cultural understanding and the meaning of the rainbow and brings it into the contemporary art sphere. The Rainbow can be regarded as a symbol of hope, new beginnings, and transformation. Through his artwork, Ruga explores and challenges the established nationalist discourses, presenting alternative ways to understand society and the nation.



Figure 2.2: Athi-Patra Ruga, *Over the Rainbow* at the Big Apple for Performa 17 Biennale in November 2016. (Elise Swain).

His thought-provoking presentation raises the issue of what lies beyond the metaphorical rainbow. The use of dress in his performance art is more than just an aesthetic choice. It is a deliberate and calculated strategy to challenge societal norms, dismantle oppressive systems, and create a counter-narrative for the marginalised. This artwork, with its title referencing the symbolism and cultural significance of the rainbow, has resonated with audiences and sparked discussions about themes such as inclusivity and diversity, social harmony, and the yearning for a better society. The rainbow, as a natural phenomenon, has been a favourite symbolic element in many cultures throughout history. It has been used as a political symbol to promote unity, diversity, and harmony. Through his choice of dress codes and costumes, Ruga challenges the dominant narratives and perceptions surrounding African identity and presents a counter-narrative that embraces the richness and diversity of African cultures. He excavates collective memory and exclusionary national myths to rebuild provocative scenes that resonate with the oppressed.

Nandipha Mntambo's artwork titled "Enchantment" (Figure 2.3) challenges traditional norms and perceptions surrounding gender, identity, and beauty. It explores themes of femininity, power, and transformation through the unconventional use of materials and the embodiment of half-human, half-animal figures. This artwork seeks to influence culture and social practice through its ability to spark meaningful conversations, challenge existing beliefs, and redefine societal norms.

One way in which "Enchantment" seeks to influence culture and social practice is by challenging traditional gender roles that are influenced by patriarchal belief systems. Through the depiction of half-human, half-animal figures, Mntambo's artwork confronts the conventional understanding of femininity and masculinity. She disrupts the binary construct of gender and opens up a dialogue about fluidity and complexity in how we understand and express gender by blending these two identities. Another way in which "Enchantment" seeks to influence culture and social practice is by challenging societal norms surrounding beauty. Mntambo challenges traditional notions of beauty that are predominantly based on Eurocentric standards by using unconventional

materials such as cowhide and incorporating elements of the animal kingdom into her artwork.



Figure 2.3: Nandipha Mntambo, Enchantment, Courtesy of the artist, and Stevenson | Johannesburg & Cape Town (2012).

She reclaims and celebrates the beauty found in diverse forms and shapes, challenging the singular notion of attractiveness. Mntambo's use of unconventional materials and her exploration of hybrid identities in "Enchantment" also challenges societal expectations and norms surrounding identity. Mntambo draws attention to the fluidity and complexity of individual identities by combining human and animal forms. This challenges the notion of fixed identities and encourages viewers to question and explore their own sense of self. "Enchantment" embodies an ability to spark meaningful conversations about power dynamics. Mntambo's depiction of half-human, half-animal figures in "Enchantment" raises questions about power and dominance within society. One notable aspect of Mntambo's artworks is her use of unconventional materials such as cowhide, resin, and plaster. This use of non-traditional materials not only adds a layer of complexity and depth to her work but also serves as a metaphor for the resilience and adaptability of African cultures in the face of ongoing challenges and change.



Figure 2.4: Nontsikelelo Vekelo, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, *Sibu VIII*”, 2007.

In Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Vekelo’s artwork entitled *Sibu VIII* (Figure 2.4) and Phumeza Figure 2.5 which formed part of her “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” exhibition (Afronova Gallery, 2007) the artist suggests that beauty is subjective and depends on individual perspective. This challenges societal norms and conventional standards of beauty, promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what is considered beautiful challenging the legacy of cultural colonisation. This artwork’s exploration of beauty and perception also addresses the legacy of cultural colonisation and its impact on African cultural identity. It also encourages a sense of cultural pride and empowerment among African youth, who may have previously felt inferior or marginalised due to the dominance of European cultural norms.

The artwork has the potential to inspire a shift in cultural attitudes and practices. The artwork conveys an idealised portrayal of new forms of representation within a civilisation characterised by constant change. The current modes of attire have significant importance among the younger generation, since fashion trends undergoes frequent and rapid transformations.



Figure 2.5. Nontsikelelo Vekelo, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: Phumeza and, 2007.

The depiction of brilliant hues is embedded in the use of patterns and excessive application of floral motifs and gold embellishments, which may be seen as indicative of affluence. The aforementioned shapes also serve as a reflection of the fabric design and dress code prevalent throughout the 1960s. Throughout this period, fabric with floral patterns was often used for various purposes, such as dress, curtains, tablecloths, wallpapers, and personal accessories. This particular fashion style gained significant popularity at that time.

Vekelo's artistic portrayal, using the features of a prominent political person as a visual background implies the artist's affiliation with the philosophy of Black consciousness. The artist's use of the background might be seen as a deliberate act of engaging with history, namely South Africa's tumultuous legacy of tyranny and apartheid, therefore conveying a political message. The political significance of Biko is in stark contrast to

the overt materialism shown by *S'khothane*. Vekelo's portrayal of the floral pattern highlights the emergence of the new regalia of *S'khothane*, which is prominently seen among various *S'khothane* communities as a means of self-expression via fashion. *S'khothane* may also be associated with the act of defiantly disregarding established stylistic norms.

Vekelo's interpretation of Biko's concept of black consciousness is shown by the younger generation via their sartorial choices and self-assuredness in both their personal style and racial identity. The black consciousness movement, being centred upon notions of self-identification, finds expression in the fashion preferences and self-confidence of these individuals. The artwork visually represents the characteristics of the postmodern lifestyle and its effect on the *S'khothane* culture, particularly in terms of the glamorous aspects. Vekelo used hues as a representation of luminosity, the exuberance of youth, and an optimistic outlook on the future.

Another creative practice by artists using dresses has been using local clothing in the art to help promote efforts that serve the interests of society to conserve the environment. Since art is influential in reaching people in many creative ways, ensuring artists wear local clothing is beneficial as it goes a long way towards achieving a sustainable clothing industry. These costumes use resources in the local setting; their production activities align with specific needs in an area; they require minimal transport; and their products are adaptive to local climates (Klepp et al., 2022:29). Encouraging these practices through art impacts the culture of people, encouraging them to embrace their choice of clothing and promote their cultural identity. Another aspect of using dresses in art is influenced by emergencies such as during Covid19 where Nurses, Doctors and Funeral undertakers, and even domestic workers had to wear protective clothing. Miles (2009:427) notes, aesthetics in times of emergency impact the practices of people to bring about changes that benefit them. Artists can effectively pass messages to the masses through their work. Incorporating clothing designs and styles that communicate the intentions of people mobilises them to participate in political changes.

2.3 DRESS CODES AS TOOLS FOR SUB-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION

Sharlene Khan's (2015:4) research examined the contemporary debates in South Africa around visual art masquerading performances which have questioned notions of identity, autobiography, and memory resulting in the construction of new sub-cultures. Khan's first chapter plots the reactivation of blackface masquerades in artwork by young White South African artists and examines the mechanisms of parodic humour and joke-work in accessing inhibited pleasure through racial stereotypes. The second chapter explores psychoanalytic (Western, black, and African) feminist and postcolonial theories on masquerading and considers the concepts of mimicry, masking, repetition, and violence as markers of this terrain. The works of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha are used to explore racial power relations but also the possibilities of masquerading as subversive of authorised knowledge in postcolonial contexts. It is important to explore and unpack the costumes and dress codes as tools for cultural construction and social commentary in performative art.

Inggs (2017) pointed out that the emergence of *S'khothane* is the following classic model of sub-culture formation, where working-class youths used dress, music, territoriality, and symbolic or ritual activities to create meaning and identity. South Africa still suffers from many social ills even after the end of apartheid and the emergence of a democratic dispensation where young people continue to face challenges such as unemployment and poverty. Consequently, one of the new means of accepting poverty towards escaping it is through embracing *S'khothane* culture by young people as a way of finding a status within the community. The term *S'khothane* emerged as street slang, derived from the Zulu word '*ukukhothana*', meaning '*to lick like a snake*' (Du Preez, 2013:8). The emergence of *S'khothane* occurred during the early 2010s as a subculture of status characterised by a style of highly visible and branded dress (Inggs, 2017:90).

S'khothane is one of many fashion-based youth culture to emerge in the townships, as Pantsula and oSwenka were characterised by particular dress codes and performance-based competitions (Inggs, 2017:91). *S'khothane* was influenced by previous dressing sub-cultures and has gradually come to represent impossible millennial aspirations that trade on the social currency provided by conspicuous

consumption and underscored by performative acts such as public dance battles (Inggs & Kemp 2015; Richards, 2015).

Memela (2018:65) offers that *S'khothane* is a South African-based, neo-tribe that gained attention in 2012, with a dress style characterised by brightly coloured floral and graphic printed Italian clothing. This neo-tribe is characterised by the wearing of luxurious and colourful clothing in order to have an impact on the crowds who come to events in the townships, and the term *S'khothane* then originally referred to playful competition between various crews whose members saw themselves as icons of street fashion, the kings, and queens of the latest dance moves (Nkosi, 2011; Tshishonga, 2015:7; Richards & Langa, 2018).

In its current form, *S'khothane* sub-culture involves gatherings that often result in the burning of expensive designer clothes and even money, in order to stand out from the crowd and prove that they are so rich that expensive possessions mean nothing (Tshishonga, 2015:7), and their loss does not affect them. In a study conducted in a township in Ekurhuleni, South Africa, *S'khothane* was referred to as an expressive sub-culture among the youth that is similar to other youth sub-cultures around the world, though this one takes a different expression (Tshishonga, 2015:8). According to Tshishonga (2015:8), such youth sub-cultures have always been underpinned by, and expressed through, music, gangsterism, fashion, and a very specific and particular identity in which impoverished young people acknowledge and attempt to distinguish themselves whenever they experienced a lack of opportunities in their countries. One young person who identified as a *S'khothane* noted that being the winner of the competition comes with enormous benefits, as they earn respect from their peers and girls (Tshishonga, 2015:8).

According to (Richards & Langa, 2018) being a *S'khothane* is not always about the burning of clothes and money, but rather a means to gain a reputation when there is no other way to acquire one. An ethnographic study by Memela (2018:82) found that the emphasis on clothing identified in the *S'khothane* sub-culture, is not different from the ways that Africans used dress as a visual markers of status, identity, and class. *S'khothane* has been defined by ostentatious and flashy performances that involve dance, dissing, and flamboyant clothing.

The *S'khothane* sub-culture can be traced back to the notion of swanking which was practised in the 1970s as a form of competition among Zulu men living in worker's hostels mainly built by mines to house the migrant workers from the so-called homelands (Goeller, 2016:4; Picarelli, 2015:213). Swanking has been defined as a conscious enactment of dandyism and the concept describing a 'perfect' and stylish gentleman, and it expresses respectable, proud, and refined masculinity (Goeller, 2016:14). Men who participated in swanking were named 'oswenka' or 'swenkas' and they favoured a formal dress code inspired by jazz-age refinement. Their favoured tailored suits, brimmed hats and leather shoes, as well as accessories including eyewear, gloves, braces, and straw hats were displayed at fashion pageants that gathered fellow dandies and citizens as judges of style (Picarelli, 2015:213). On such occasions, swenkas would display their ensembles and outfits with elaborate acts and special 'moves' aimed at drawing attention to their outfit's details, and the winner would receive money or, more rarely, goods such as cows, goats, radios, or watches (Goeller, 2016:9; Picarelli, 2015:213). Swanking was considered to be about building self-esteem and social status, as it is a socio-political statement that tended to describe how men used clothing to make a living in society and to maintain and preserve their masculinity. Swanking is still practiced and has been considered a form of emancipation and ethnic pride on the African continent (Picarelli, 2015:216).

The spread of communication technologies in Africa and the tailored fashions produced within the continent have boosted the swanking outreach and imposed it at the vanguard of both the mainstream and sub-cultural scenes (Picarelli, 2015:213). The street-style blogs based in the metropolitan hubs of Africa continuously inspire a transnational collectiveness of young fashionables (Chiénin, 2015; Picarelli 2015:213). The latest fashion trends show an ability to imbue clothes with cultural capital and social advancement. Young people, more specifically students, have used vintage dressing to express this living model of swanking and embodied a new trend of clothing for young people. According to Economou (2015:56), vintage dressing has presented an idea of creative opportunities for self-representation and expression of identity, imaginatively connecting past and present, and invoking various forms of mediated memory. This could also be a push back against a consumerist society and fast fashion and its impact on the environment. It could be interpreted as a form of social

protest against the destruction of the earth and our tendency to buy anything and everything without thinking about the cost to the environment.

Young people in the United States of America (USA), specifically in New York, have made sense of the city through reference to embodied forms of cultural expression, including ways of acting, style of dress and hip-hop styles. Eglinton (2013:255) noted in the construction of New York dressing sense, as young people described the city not as a place of marked inequality but rather based on their own experiences and on the internalisation of the common expressions and representations signifying the city. In Eglinton's (2013:254) study, one participant who identified as Jamaican and Trinidadian and lived in Brooklyn for some time emphasised that a shirt they wore symbolised interconnecting behaviours and images presenting a touch on style and the representation of places and cited New York as a 'loud', and a notoriously noisy place which is neither fictive nor stereotypical, but representing a part of their experience of urban life.

Another participant noted how people in New York act and dress, placing emphasis on gender differences in terms of clothing for girls and boys. This participant noted that girls usually wore tight clothing, whereas boys would wear baggy or saggy clothing. This dress style represented a particular New York style that the youth expressed and conveyed to emphasise the dawn of hip-hop culture, where the hip-hop style was connected to urban life (Eglinton, 2013:263). The sagging pants phenomenon originated in the USA and became an extremely popular fashion trend in hip-hop culture (Charles, 2014:4). However, Charles (2014:04) points out that the style had its roots in the American prison system where inmates wore saggy pants because of being denied belts that could be used to commit suicide or as a weapon to hurt others. However, American and Latino men who wore saggy pants as they firmly traced it within hip-hop fashion denied this origin or idea. Charles (2014:3) argued that the sagging pants style should be seen as a form of communication and fashionable rebellion against the expectations of society. In Jamaica, it was noted that some Jamaican males who wore saggy pants and exposed their underwear did it as part of their dancehall music, fashion and culture. A study among twenty young males who wore saggy pants and exposed their underwear found that saggy pants were a preferred and comfortable fashion norm (Charles, 2014:7). In the study, it was found

that these young males grew up seeing and watching this fashion trend in hip-hop music videos and felt that it was acceptable to display their creative underwear designs publicly.

Since clothes were invented, their purposes for humans have evolved from needs for thermoregulation and protection to being elements of culture and expression. In all cultures and societies, people distinguish themselves by how they dress; the rich and those in the upper classes have always been better dressed than the poor so that people recognise them as rich and members of a higher social class. An important distinction among Africans is that they do this even when they are not rich, as illustrated by the S'kothane, Swenka, and Mapansula. They do this partly as a means of securing their dignity, which oppressive societies such as apartheid and colonisation have denied them. Thus, when they are walking in the streets, people cannot tell by looking at them that they are poor, have been stripped of their self-respect by being forced to work at demeaning jobs, and might still not be able to provide for their families adequately.

Extensive literature (highlight a few here) has documented the changes in the adoption of clothing since its origins and subsequent trends that have culminated in transformation in people's practices. Scholars attribute the invention of clothes to the need to control human body temperatures, but there are theories citing the necessity of covering their nudity and protection from harm as possible motivators. People embraced the clothes developed in their locality to the point of making them part of their cultures and social lives. Through the development of dress codes and cultural identities, clothing has impacted people and artists. The incorporation of clothing in performative art, particularly, has expanded the effects of clothing on human life. Twigg (2007:286) noted that "clothing mediates the relationship between the body and the social world, forming the vestimentary envelope that contains and makes manifest the body, offering a means whereby it is experienced, presented, and given meaning". People participate in performance events and interact with the clothing practices of artists to derive their own meanings. As a result, they follow or discuss performances to form meanings for clothes in their political, social, and cultural lives.

2.4 THEORY OF THE SUBLIME

Through the sublime, this study aimed at exploring and understanding not only the aesthetic appeal but the intended performance artists' message as well as the inferred viewers' interpretation of the costume, thereby adding many layers of information. The theory of the sublime evokes intense emotions, typically a combination of awe, wonder, vastness, insignificance, and fear, which characterise an encounter with the incredible natural world.

This study sought to articulate feelings of the participants as expressed by them (Ingram, 2023). Artists utilise their performance clothing/costumes as a means of communicating and expressing themselves. This enables them to communicate feelings that may be challenging to articulate verbally but can be effectively conveyed through their choice of costume. In this context, performers and artists possess the ability to communicate through the medium of artistic language. It is important to note that this communication may be subject to misinterpretation if one does not engage in the process of actively seeking and exploring the perspectives of the artist who wore such costumes and dress code.

This research examined three diverse domains of the sublime, romanticism, modernism, and postmodernism. It focused on the sublime as conceptualised by romantic artists. Romanticism defined the sublime as the infinite and ideal (Cardinal 1975), describing phenomena or entities that resisted comparison (Flew 1984). This notion continues to be employed to delineate enormous or powerful entities and to assess artwork of the highest standard. This study focused on the work of Edmund Burke in the Enlightenment era, which postulated that the sublime and the beautiful are distinct. In his work, the sublime is rooted in experiences of vastness, obscurity, and power, invoking feelings of awe and danger, while the beautiful relates to experiences of pleasure and serenity (Burke 1828:193-209). For Burke, the sublime has a physicality, as it evokes a physiological response. Earlier, Immanuel Kant deepened the exploration of the aesthetic sublime in his "Critique of Judgment". He distinguished between the mathematical sublime (vastness in size) and the dynamical sublime (vastness in power). For Kant, the experience of the sublime arises when our

sensory experience is overwhelmed, but our reason asserts itself by grasping the infinite (Kant 1790:139).

The relationship between the aesthetic sublime and fashion elegance might not be immediately apparent. However, the two concepts share an interconnectedness rooted in the appreciation of beauty, grandeur, and emotional power. Through the aesthetic sublime, fashion elegance elevates the viewer's experience. Fashion elegance goes beyond mere clothing; it is an embodiment of a certain kind of beauty and grace that can leave a lasting impression, much like a sublime landscape.

Across various historical periods, instances of the sublime within the realm of artistic expression have occasionally served as a means to offer commentary on prevailing societal ideals or the fundamental nature of humanity. Fashion has also served as a medium for expressing societal observations and critiques. Elegance, in particular, can reflect society's standards, aspirations, and even its disparities. For instance, the elegance of 1950s Parisian haute couture reflected a certain post-war aspiration while also indicating societal norms and class distinctions. Just as the sublime can teeter on the edge of overwhelming or even terrifying (consider the vastness of the universe or the raw power of nature), fashion elegance can also be excessive or overwhelming if it is too ostentatious or loses its sense of authenticity.

The exploration of the aesthetic sublime spans centuries and encompasses various shifts in interpretation, leading to diverse alterations in interpretation. Ingram (2023) argues that the essence of the sublime lies in its emotional nature, stemming from complex relationships between individuals and their surroundings. It encompasses both the natural realm and transcends it, allowing a deeper understanding of one's existence. Artists use techniques such as colour, perspective, immersive installations, and sound to create experiences that engage the viewer's senses, as in this study, they use performance costumes. The sublime serves as a commentary on humanity's connection to the natural world, technological advancements, and current conflicts and aggression. The emotional experience that arises from the intricate interplay between humanity and its surroundings, encompassing the natural environment as well as realms beyond the immediate physical realm, leads viewers to a multiplicity of meanings, sometimes affecting the message being conveyed by the performance

artists. This is due to the viewer's prior knowledge associated with certain words and visual communication, such as clothing and other cultural objects. First, as culturally constructed products are sometimes entrenched with seductive meaning and interpretation, and second, their role in enhancing the message the performative artist conveys.

According to John Berger (2004:16-17), the word connotation comes from the Latin "connotate", which means "to mark along with," and refers to the cultural meanings that become attached to words and other forms of communication. In addition, connotation can also be described as emotional or imaginative meaning associated with a sign, symbol, or word. A word's connotations involve the symbolic, historical, and emotional matters connected to it. In Roland Barthes' book *Mythologies* (1972), he distinguished French semiotics and addresses the cultural connotations of many aspects of French daily life, such as steak and frites, detergents, Citroën automobiles, and wrestling (Barthes 1972:16-17). On the other hand, denotation refers to the literal or explicit meanings of words and other phenomena. Ferdinand de Saussure (1983:66) defined denotation as the understandable functional element of the sign, code, or sign system, which leads to the generalised meaning that is instilled by a sign or the element that is present. Hence, prior knowledge plays a major role in analysing and interpreting social commentary art.

In terms of clothing, Burke's theory offers a framework for understanding how it fosters ambivalent sentiments. For instance, the appealing facade of a stage costume may simultaneously instigate feelings of unease or agitation stemming from the underlying cultural or performative implications. The use of clothing in performance art results in the abstraction of everyday dress, creating an aura of magnificent terror and beauty, adding layers to the messages a performer seeks to communicate.

2.5 THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN THE SUBLIME AND RELATIONAL AESTHETICS

Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics suggests that dresses carry an enhanced capacity for creating interpersonal connections and triggering interactions. As an integral part of performance art, dressing offers the potential for dialogue and engagement, becoming a bridge between the performer and the audience. With the

aid of clothing, the artist can establish relationships, induce dialogue, and even provoke reactions from the audience. Dressing is closely linked to relational aesthetics through fostering social interactions, thereby laying the foundation for unique experiences.

Burke's theory of the Sublime and Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics offer valuable insights into understanding the considerable influence that clothing has in performance art. Clothing, as culturally constructed products, not only prompts emotional responses but also engages the audience in meaningful interactions, thus enhancing the intended performative message and contributing to the art's overall impact. Appreciating and comprehending the intimate connection between clothing and these theories can significantly refine our perception and understanding of the societal, cultural, and aesthetic discourses in performance art.

The fundamental role of clothing in society cannot be understated. It is beyond the mere purpose of covering one's body against climatic conditions. They are symbols with nuanced layers of meanings which definitely adhere to Burke's (1990) theory of the Sublime associated with clothing. In his 1990 publication 'A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful', Burke postulated that the experience of the Sublime, a form of aesthetic pleasure, is closely related to an evocation of fear, awe or terror. People's clothing carry the potential to invoke similar Sublime experiences. When one comes across a culturally significant attire or a fashion statement, be it a Scottish kilt or a Victorian-era gown, the strong sensory experience triggers reactions akin to those proposed by Burke - be it a sense of awe, admiration, or even bewilderment. Clothing also becomes performative, strengthening the message conveyed by the artist, a testament to the relationship between wardrobe and performance art.



Figure 2.6: Lady Gaga's famous meat dress, 2010 MTV, Cosmopolotan.com.

For example, Lady Gaga's famous meat dress, Figure 2.6, was more than a fashion statement. It was a powerful social commentary on the rights of the LGBT community. She was protesting against the US military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy on sexuality, which was still in effect in 2010. She was urging the US military not to discriminate against gay men and lesbians from serving in the army. She said that the law prevents the military from enjoying "the greatest cut of meat my country has to offer" (Alexander, 2011). The dress, therefore, becomes not merely a garment but a complex symbol of identity, protest, and belonging in the world. The dialogue and exchange enabled by clothing, as infused with Burke's Sublime and Bourriaud's relational aesthetics,

provides a novel perspective on understanding the sociocultural dimensions of clothing.

These theories provide a lens to decode and appreciate the multifarious roles and meanings of clothing. They stand as culturally constructed products replete with profound implications and interpretation and play a significant part in enhancing the message a performative artist conveys. Furthermore, these theories, when applied to clothes and accessories in performance art, reveal the stratified layers of communication, interpretation, and perspective that clothing can create and carry. Clothing, often taken for granted due to ubiquity, offered under the light of these theories, become transformative tools of expression, communication and connection - a universal language whose dialect changes from culture to culture, artist to artist, and wearer to the observer.

This study is centred on an interpretive approach that is applied to the theoretical framework congruent with these perspectives. Theories serve as instrument to foster the progression of knowledge, and as guiding frameworks for investigators or researchers (Mallick & Verma, 1999). Therefore the theories applied in this research sought to offer explanatory concepts that present perspectives for examining this study's research problem (Silverman, 2006). The utilisation of the theories assisted in enhancing apprehension, anticipation, and to explain various events, as well as challenge and expand pre-existing knowledge within the confines of crucial limiting beliefs (Swanson & Chermack, 2013).

2.6 SEMIOTICS OF DRESSING AS MECHANISM WITHIN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Dressing plays an important role in social construction due to its historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions, which influence not only personal perceptions but also societal norms and values. Dressing is inextricably linked to cultural identity, acting as a visual representation of traditions, beliefs, and values. Traditional garments reflect a culture's aesthetic sensibilities, as well as its historical and symbolic significance. Dressing can also serve as a bridge between cultures, promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Dressing has a significant impact on the construction and reinforcement of social roles. Dresses/clothes serve multiple

functions as an expression mechanism in social construction. As societies evolve, historical social status markers give way to contemporary tools for individual expression and cultural representation.

In human communication, appearance serves as a powerful expression mechanism. Semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols, provides a powerful lens through which we can understand the importance of appearance in conveying complex meanings. Semiotics is the study of signs. This applies to anything that "stands for" something else. Signs can be words, images, sounds, gestures, or objects. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation, but as part of a semiotic "sign system" (e.g., medium or genre). They investigate how meanings are constructed and how reality is represented (Chandler, 2007:2). The importance of semiotics and symbolic communication is to decipher the nuances of language of appearance, with a focus on how people use clothing, body language, and accessories to express their identity, culture, and social values. Semiotics and symbolic communication have many applications as an expression mechanism. They act as a link between the internal self and the outside world, allowing people to communicate complex messages without verbal communication.

How the audience relates to the signs of the costume is lined in the denotation and connotation of the sign. The denotation has a real meaning or is still based on sensory perception (Barthes, 1972: 113–114). It refers to the literal meaning of the sign that comprises the communication (Allen, 2003:50). The interaction, then, moves from the denotation to connotation which involves the same processes as though reading myth. According to Roland Barthes, connotation is the interaction that occurs when a sign meets its users' feelings, knowledge, and emotion, as well as the values of their culture and history. The connotations are a system that consists of signifiers, signified, and the process that unites the former to the latter, or signification system (Barthes, 1968: 91). A wide range of human actions and productions convey common meanings to members of a particular culture, and thus can be analysed as signs that function in diverse modes of signifying systems (Abrams and Harpam, 2012: 358).

People navigate social interactions by using dresses/clothes, body language, and personal artifacts to express their identities, affiliations, and emotions. Understanding

and appreciating the semiotic contexts of appearance fosters a stronger connection and promotes a more inclusive and nuanced interpretation of the various ways in which humans communicate. This helps the artists' work through their dressing, costume choices and achieves the impact they want to have with their performance expressions. In a contemporary sphere where diversity is celebrated, semiotics provides a key to unlocking the myriad meanings embedded in human appearance.

The value of semiotics lies in its ability to decode these symbols, revealing the layers of meaning embedded in seemingly mundane aspects of human appearance. Along with the attire of dress, the human body itself becomes a rich source of symbols. Body language, encompassing gestures, postures, and facial expressions, constitutes communication. Through carriage, subtleties of their facial expressions, and the deliberate or unconscious movements, semiotic language is expressed. Understanding these nonverbal symbols allows us to grasp emotions, intentions, and social cues that may not be articulated verbally and become mechanisms for decoding meaning.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology and procedures used for data collection as well as how the chosen artists and images were selected. The chosen artists and their selected artworks are presented, and this is followed by a motivation for using focus group interviews as a supplementary method of data collection.

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THIS STUDY'S METHODOLOGY

The study applied a social constructivist philosophical paradigm in both data collection and analysis. According to Creswell (2014), social constructivists believe that individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and lead the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. Creswell (2014) further postulates that constructivism, or social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism), is a qualitative research perspective in which theories about reality are constructed through social conventions. This means that the emergent knowledge from the data is generated through shared discourses.

The study further makes the assumptions as postulated by Crotty (1998:1), that humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives, and the generated meanings are always subjective, arising in and out of interaction with human communities. Crotty asserts that we are all born into a world of meaning bestowed upon us by our culture. Thus, this study seeks to understand the context in which dress codes, and in particular performance costumes, are presented by the artist and received by the viewers in an artistic expression. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives (Creswell, 2014). Constructs of the background of the researcher also shape the interpretation from personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The intention is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the costumes and dress codes as tools for cultural construction and social commentary in performative art, which is the theme of the current study.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRATEGY

The study used the multi-case study method of data collection within a qualitative paradigm to investigate the importance of clothing, first as a means for cultural construction and interpretation, and secondly, their value when they are used in performance art for social commentary art. The study sought to discover whether culturally conceived perceptions of the viewers about the meaning and interpretation of dress codes/clothing/costumes affect the message conveyed by the artist when they are used in an artistic expression. The main objective of the study was to answer the question of whether a performance/artwork can convey the same message in social commentary art without the performer's chosen costume. According to Creswell (2009:4), qualitative research (which was adopted for this study) is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This research process involved developing questions and procedures, data typically collected directly from the participants/informants, data analysis inductively constructed from basic facts to generate themes, and the researcher directly making interpretations of the meanings from the data. The final written report has a flexible structure, supporting an inductive style of empirical observation to generate conclusions, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation.

Case studies are a design of inquiry found in many fields of research, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, event, or activity. Case studies can make use of a variety of data collection techniques, such as several types of interviews, including focus group discussion and/or informal conversations, observations and an analysis of relevant documents. In this case, probabilities are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information over a sustained period of time (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009, 2012).

The data collection process of this study was done in three parts: first were the interviews of the performance artists Steven Cohen, Carin Bester and Wezile Mgibe. The data from these artists was collected to discover the artists' intentions when choosing dress codes/costumes for their artistic expressions. These artists all use dress codes/costumes to communicate, express, address, critique and comment on

social issues. The three performance artists were invited by email to participate in this study, and they agreed to be interviewed using online platforms such as e-mail, Zoom, and Skype. These interviews were conducted from 15 August 2020 to 16 April 2022 (see Appendix B and C).

Steven Cohen was born in 1962 in Johannesburg, South Africa, and lives in Lille, France. He is a visual and performance artist, staging interventions in the public realm and in gallery/theatre spaces. Cohen has never shied away from using dress code, performance, and video to explore all the tender issues he confronts in being Jewish, gay, white, South African, and middle-aged.

Wezile Mgibe is an art practitioner whose interdisciplinary practice encompasses performance, video, and installation as a tool for social change. His work confronts prejudices and advocates against social inequality, and creates a platform for critical self-reflexivity within unwelcoming spaces. Mgibe's work is influenced by how things have come into existence, as well as motivations behind certain movements, reactions, and human behaviours, and mostly how these become symbols of culturally accepted norms. Mgibe is a 2019 David Koloane Award recipient, the 2020 Fruits of Democracy in Arts Award recipient, and an Arts and Culture Trust Finalist Award recipient for 2020.

Carin Bester grew up in Welkom in the Free State. At school, she used to be involved with a lot of sports activities, but at home, her mother had many different Arts and Crafts hobbies. Both her Father and Grandfathers made crafts from wood. She had a creative streak with her hands and spent a lot of time watching and learning from her family. She studied Method Acting at The Method Acting Training Centre in Pretoria and continued doing various short courses with industry leaders when she moved to Cape Town. Over the years, she worked as an actress as well in the Art Department for TV, Film and Theatre. In 2017, she performed a work entitled *My Body My Life* which took the statistics of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa directly to the viewers as an activism against GBV.

The six artists' artworks which were selected for this study were due to the comments their art expressed on various social issues, making art a dynamic tool for social

change. Semantic and Content Analysis were used to analyse and interpret the emergent data collected for this study.

Secondly, data was collected through three focus group interviews/discussions, first to discover the chosen participants' views based on their cultural perceptions about the utilised clothing and accessories in the artistic expressions that were presented to them. Second, to discover whether there is a relationship between the artists' intentions when choosing performance costumes with viewers' interpretations and the meaning of clothing as cultural constructs. The focus groups analysed and interpreted the performance artists (Steven Cohen, Carin Bester and Wezile Mgibe) chosen performances, as well as Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare, and Nandipha Mntambo's two artworks each, which were chosen by the researcher due to their performative nature and that they also utilised clothing.

During these sessions, research participants were arranged in a theatrical set-up and at the end of the video, they were asked questions, as seen in Appendix D, discussing the works at length. Their views were sought on whether the performances/artworks that were presented to them could have conveyed the same message if the artists had not chosen the costumes they wore. Anderson (1990:241) defined a focus group as a group that is comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic guided by the researcher. Thus, the characteristics of the focus groups were the prior knowledge they brought as the views of the artistic expressions. These discussions were also to discover the relationship between performing artists' chosen costumes and the viewers' interpretation of the messages conveyed, as well as the group participants' views on clothing as cultural constructs.

In addition, the three focus group participants were pre-informed about the nature of this study and the scheduled date of the interview on the 3rd of July 2022. They were also told that the interviews were going to be recorded, but the data would be utilised solely within the parameters of the study, and in line with UNISA ethical clearance principles. Subsequently, the three focus group participants agreed to be part of the study and be interviewed. Therefore verbal consent from the participants was obtained. The recordings of all interviews were transcribed and form part of Appendix

D. I referred back to them (the transcriptions) when I was writing the report on the findings and interpretation of this study. In addition, my supervisor and focus group participants were permitted to view the transcripts and recordings. The first interviews took place on the 9th of July 2022 for focus groups 1 & 2 (Figure 3.1) and on 13 September 2022 for group 3 (Figure 3.2).



Figure 3.1: Focus group 1 participants watching videos, 9 July 2022



Figure 3.2: Focus group 3 participants watching videos, 13 September 2022

There were five participants per group and since the first two groups were conducted on the same day, the set-up was the same, hence only one visual presentation. The participants were selected from the North West University in South Africa at the Mafeking campus due to its proximity to the researcher's work place. From the focus groups, a selection of Four key informants were further probed to discover their views on the effectiveness of the chosen artworks on social commentary. These participants were selected due to their visibility during the discussion sessions.

The third and final data collection which supplemented the performance artists' responses and the focus groups interviews was the analysis of documents, such as catalogues, newspaper articles and social media platforms commenting on social issues related to performance costumes and dress codes in general. The emergent data was interpreted to make apparent the significance of clothing in defining new norms and habits, especially when they are used as objects of expressive art.

These various forms of data collection were applied to secure the study's credibility, taking into account the inherent multiplicity of meanings associated with dress codes due to them being objects of cultural construction. A combination of these various types of interviews, observations, and document analysis were triangulated to provide cross-data validity checks. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Triangulation arose from an ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes, and, in case studies, it can be achieved by using multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003). It is an approach that utilises multiple data sources, multiple informants, and multiple methods to gather multiple perspectives on the same issue so as to gain a more complete understanding of the phenomena being investigated. Triangulation is used to compare data to decide if it corroborates (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002) and, thus, to validate research findings. It is one of the most important ways to improve the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings. In this study, triangulation was used to substantiate whether the performance costumes and accessories used by the chosen artists in their works carry the meaning they meant to convey when interpreted by the viewers who participated in this study.

3.3 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Neuman (1997:426), the most important aspects of data analysis are that the researcher organises, arranges, and orders the data as well as the search for recurring patterns or themes that may prove to represent the respondents' perspectives. Similarly, De Vos (2002:197) mentioned that it is "bringing order, structure and meaning to the collected data". The researcher followed this process in analysing the data collected after receiving all responses from the first three participants (selected artists) who were interviewed using online platforms and focus groups who were interviewed face to face. As such, and for the purposes of this study, the researcher opted for Semantic and Content Analysis to analyse and interpret the emergent data.

Cliff Goddard and Andrea Schalley (2010:94) define Semantic Analysis as a process of analysing the meanings of words and grammatical structure and identifying relationships between individual words in a particular context. On the other hand, Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon (2005:1277) define Content Analysis as a research tool that is used to analyse the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data. Rather than being a single method, Content Analysis has three distinct approaches, and these are conventional, directed, and summative. They were used to interpret meaning from the content of text data and adhere to the naturalistic paradigm. Conventional content analysis and coding categories are derived directly from the text data. In a directed approach, the analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. Summative content analysis involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context.

Furthermore, the use of Semantic and Content Analysis sought to discover congruence between the artists' intentions regarding the messages their final artworks are conveying, and how they are perceived by the viewers. This was also in line with Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of *Relational Aesthetics*, which he described as the aesthetics of sharing and inter-human exchange in which art is viewed as a collective elaboration of meaning that allows for exchange and reflection. Thus, relational aesthetics was instrumental in articulating the relationship between the performing artist's intentions in choosing their costumes and accessories and how the

viewer interprets and assigns meaning to the entire performance.

3.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was subjected to ethical clearance procedures as regulated by the University of South Africa's (UNISA) ethics principles and guidelines, as it involved human beings as research participants. The UNISA Ethical Clearance approval letter is attached as (Appendix A) to conduct interviews. All randomly selected participants (artists) were informed of the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation in the study, and its accuracy. The participants signed a consent form prior to being interviewed. They gave permission to be interviewed, and they were assured that their information would be used solely for the purposes of this study. Participants were furthermore informed of their rights to participate or to withdraw from the research process at any time when a need arose from their side. All the materials forming part of the study's collected data are kept confidential and are only accessible to the primary investigator and his academic supervisors.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings that were drawn from the interviews of the performance art by artists Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe and Carin Bester. It also presents an analysis and interpretation of all the six artists' artworks by the three focus group participants. A selection of sculptures/artworks of the three artists Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare and Nandipha Mntambo were included in the analysis by the focus groups. The three focus group interviews were carried out to discover the relationship between performing artists' intended messages, viewers' interpretations and clothing as cultural constructs with diverse meanings. The findings are presented from the performance clips and written responses from the three performance artists, analysis and interpretation of the chosen sculptures/photographs by the focus groups' participants' transcripts (Appendix C, D & E). Furthermore, findings were supplemented with information extracted from documents such as catalogues, newspaper articles and social media platforms commenting on social issues related to costumes and dress codes as tools for cultural construction and social commentary in performance art.

4.1 THE FINDINGS FROM THE THREE PERFORMANCE ARTISTS

The first part of the findings presents the data from the three performance artists: Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe, and Carin Bester. The data sought to discover these artists' messages and meanings of their performances in which they used dress codes and accessories to convey the current societal concerns and issues, their biggest influences, and trends. These three artists were requested to choose one performance piece that utilised dress codes and accessories from their practice, three still images from each performance and explain the meaning of the performance.

4.1.1 Steven Cohen

According to Steven Cohen, he was exposed to challenging life situations, which, in a way, stimulated his artistic expression. In his performances he utilises costumes and accessories, including his personal social interest and his relationships with male figures. When he was asked; How does he want people to call him? His response was, "*I prefer to be labelled Queer than gay*" (see Appendix C). He was raised in a stable family of a Jewish background from Eastern Europe and grew up during the

apartheid regime in South Africa. As a child, he was a gymnast and matriculated in South Africa. He then furthered his studies as a psychologist at the University of the Witwatersrand. Due to the South African - Apartheid Regime Law, all white males were compelled to do military service. He completed his National Service (Compulsory for every white South African young man who matriculated then) with no joy due to his religious orientation. Steven Cohen found it difficult to comply with weapon training or weapon handling in his own words, as he mentioned that he refused to touch any weapon (see Appendix C1).



Figure 4.1: Steven Cohen, GOLGOTHA C-print, 90 x 80cm, Edition of 3, photographer: Marianne Greber Courtesy of the artist, 2007.

The effect of his religious background on his military training had serious repercussions and impacted his emotional and psychological standing in such a way that he spent most military training being treated in a mental asylum. Due to the suppression of his rights within the army, he then resorted to risk - which eventually built his confidence and led him to becoming a successful South African cross-dressing performance artist. He grew stronger and more confident. His artworks aim

to explore the underlying social conventions and challenge prejudice in every form through creative invention.

When he was questioned about the artwork entitled *GOLGOTHA?* (Figure 4.1), Steven Cohen's response was, "I bought the two skulls, which were sold legally from a New York shop and converted them into shoes in order to commemorate my late brother who committed suicide" (see Appendix C1). He further stated that the artwork is a remembrance of walking on his brother's past after his death, which reminded him of the area where he grew up in New York, Wall Street, Ground Zero.

The circumstances of Cohen's life experience landed him in art. He also uses dress codes in creating artistic expressions in dealing with social commentary art without being prejudiced by any individual. He has navigated the art world without caution, his risky nature helped him with his bold inventions. As a visual and performance artist, staging interventions in the public realm and in gallery/theatre spaces, he has never been afraid to use dress code, performance, and video to explore all the gender issues he confronts in being Jewish, gay, white, and a South African who was also middle-aged. His artworks have always had the element of costumes and the inspiration of the dress code by the public as he explains it, "I have always been fascinated by what people wear, by what that signifies, by how that defines them. Encoded in dress is a vast set of signifiers of who we choose to be and how society reacts to that" (see Appendix C).

However, when asked about the intention and rationale behind the artwork, Steven Cohen stated that his artworks are based on addressing the following: injustice, racism, gender issues, anti-Semitism, diaspora, xenophobia, patriarchal domination, violence, wealth disparity, animal rights and generally intolerance of any kind. Furthermore, he mentioned that he has never been influenced by personality and or moral standards, but more of what he perceives as reality and truth, and he believes he was not influenced by anyone.

Commenting on the artwork entitled *Chandelier* (2001) (Figure 4.3), he stated that the piece was very generic in the sense that he openly left it to a researcher and invited the general public for interpretation.

Chandelier is a performance I made for the first time on video in 2001, in South Africa in the middle of the black homeless people of Johannesburg during the destruction of their slum by the municipal employees. It is a ballet where violence is omnipresent. "By my moving in a chandelier-tutu through a squatter camp being demolished, and filming it, I'm creating a digital painting of a social reality, half beautifully imagined, half horribly real". Chandelier's work reveals through performance art, dance and film, the contradictions between Europe and Africa, white and black, rich and poor, shadow and light, the private and the public, the strong and the oppressed, security and danger.

Figure 4.2: Steven Cohen's explanation of his Chandelier's performance

The dress code utilised during the *Chandelier* (2001) and the artworks have become part of Iziko/ (South African National Gallery). Hence, there are two schools of thought based on social commentary; that is, one group holds the opinion that man exhibits pure artwork in a manner suitable for him and by all means necessary, while the other groups view it from moral and cultural discomfort perspective [see Figure 4.3, artwork entitled *Chandelier* (2001)].

Cohen sees his artwork as a gift from God in such a way that he compares it to a baby that is raised for the world to appreciate and benefit from. Notably, cross-dressing plays a central role in Cohen's performance pieces, where make-up and accessories, such as glitter, also feature heavily. Each of Cohen's performances relies on a rather unrealistic and outlandish dress style aimed at provoking a response from audiences. In this performance piece, *Chandelier* Cohen literally donned a corset to which a chandelier was affixed and, in high heels, wandered through a squatter camp inhabited by poor and underprivileged black people. A white male dressed in drag and wandering about in a poverty-stricken black community is all but conventional. Cohen's choice of this setting is made even more curious given his background of being gay and Jewish, thus juxtaposing and stressing that which many would consider on the margins of society. Placing his performance (and himself) in this setting also draws attention to the apartheid government's forced removal of black people from developing and industrialised areas.



Figure 4.3: Steven Cohen, Chandelier Art Intervention Newtown, 2001.

The apartheid government systematically implemented forced removals as a means to enforce racial segregation and maintain white supremacy by removing black people from developing and industrialised areas. The implementation of forced removals during the apartheid era was a deliberate strategy employed by the government to enforce racial segregation and uphold white supremacy

4.1.2 Wezile Mgibe

The second artist, Wezile Mgibe from Port Elizabeth, specialises in performance art, film and art installation and has been practising his artworks for over seven years. His artworks are aimed at highlighting voices, bodies and objects that reflect human behaviour and reactions in unwelcoming spaces. Wezile came from a theatre environment where he focused on musical and contemporary dance. Furthermore, his artworks focus on current social or political issues, creating spaces and platforms that enable people to interpret or communicate their feelings without violating their sense of self or exposing them to further trauma.



Figure 4.4: Wezile Mgibe, in these Streets (series of artworks), 2017.

When he was asked about the postures and their meanings in his selected artworks, he delightfully mentioned that even though artworks appear the same, it was basically the continuation of the same material with elements such as silhouette utilised to give the intended meaning of the bandages. He deliberately utilised a white bandage as a dress code to express a clear meaning without any reference (inference) to any social grouping or cultural meaning. His intention is to give attention to the artworks as they are seen and perceived instead of developing ideas about their adventurous meaning and prejudice. He also intends to convey a message of hope, healing, and recovery through his performances (see Appendix C2). When asked about the dress code and the choice of materials utilised in his artworks, specifically in Figure 4.4, he explicitly mentioned his role in the interpretation of a model interrogator, hence the addition of cotton to the existing bandage.

Wezile is seeking answers and solutions by utilising deception to avoid exposure or compromise. Based on the artwork, much of an individual's attention turns to focus more on the appearances that raise serious curiosity rather than paying attention to the intended question and statement in the open (see Appendix C). Being a member

who is fully engaged in community projects/activities and family matters, he spends time reading about RSA history, which also became margins on contribution towards his improvement in ideas of artwork. As he stated, the dress code has always been a meaningful act based on the occasion intended (see Appendix C).

It's a work where I developed a character of an interrogator. This character is seeking for solutions, and for answers. So the character acts as a representative and the use of Cotton was to substitute the bandages, which are a still on. But I was very interested in continuing to use the material, very light materials and yeah. And also the material that I use, was also to bring curiosity in terms of the identity and in terms of audience or anyone trying to figure it out, what's going on or is this? So there's an element of a curiosity about the work and the only way for you to get answers or whatever else, or whatever questions you have to be answers was for you to actually be paying attention to what was going on, or like trying to study whatever was going on to the movement of guesses, which is what that is, what was portrayed.

Figure 4.5: Wezile Mgibe's explanation of his "in these Streets" performance

His artworks are aimed at addressing some unexpected social concerns and issues such as inequality, unwelcoming spaces, and mental and domestic violation. To some extent, some of the expressions are from some of his family's and friends' emotional experiences. He displays a path of a seeker who always goes out of his way to research and question ways and means to artistically express and address any given situation without infringing on any human rights by using a dress code in the form of dealing with Social Commentary Art. For him, the colour white symbolises peace and has no negative bearing/meaning to any culture or nation. The colour white retains its symbolism for peace throughout the Planet (see Appendix C).

4.1.3 Carin Bester

Carin Bester, is recognised as a multi-media performance & installation artist, actress and activist. She also works as an art director, and stylist in the film and commercial

industries. She grew up in Welkom in the Free State. She was involved in a lot of sports activities during her days at school. She comes from a creative home, her mother had many different arts and crafts artefacts, and her father and grandfathers both made crafts from wood. Growing up, she always loved creating with her hands and spent a lot of time watching and learning from them.



Figure 4.6: Carin Bester, My Body My Life for 16 days of Activism 2017 (Street Intervention) CBD and Parliament Cape Town.

In her response to the question pertaining to her longevity in the arts; she said, “This is an interesting question because what is it that makes us artists? Are we born as artists, or do circumstances and our journey mould us into becoming artists? I think both are right, depending on the person. I do not have an answer as to when I became an artist”. She reminisced that in high school she would make different crafts which she could sell or donate as gifts. She also did set design and building for her school’s

beauty pageants. In her matric year, she could no longer participate in sports due to a knee injury, so she joined the drama group, which became a big turning point for her. Until that time, she wanted to study Interior Architectural Design, but there was a shift in the discovery of using the body as the instrument of creativity. She furthered her studies in Acting Methods study at The Method Acting Training Centre in Pretoria and continued doing various short courses within the industry. Over the years, she worked as an actress as well in the Art Department for TV, Film and Theatre in Cape Town (see Appendix C3).



Figure 4.7: Carin Bester, My Body My Life for 16 days of Activism 2017 (Street Intervention) CBD and Parliament Cape Town.

Her works are mostly activist intervention projects. She might be perceived as a feminist because, in most cases, her work directly and openly confronts related issues of serious concern that affect the community at large. Carin's artistic approach is very confrontational in such a way that she does not have to comment on it; it is self-explanatory.

So, I decided to use the My Body My Life installation and create a moving interventional piece. The intervention started at 7:30 in the morning outside the head offices of Spree and Take a Lot, two of the biggest online shopping websites. After about an hour and a half, I moved through the streets of Cape Town, through company gardens towards Parliament, where I stood for a few hours. The 'Dress of Remembrance' was created and worn on 1 Aug 2018 for the iconic nationwide "#TheTotalShutdownMarch." This march was the beginning of a movement's great shift within SA towards more awareness and an active fight for change to end GBV. A black dress, much like a funeral dress, yet I exposed more skin, more body. That which we are told to cover up to protect us from sexual violence. This a comment on the often-heard "What were you wearing?" question.

The bottom half of the dress is made from newspaper prints with black and white photos of victims. We see the faces of women and children sourced from daily news reports. All these faces share the same harrowing conclusion to their lives, they died at the hands of men. Their images create a ghostlike memorial image on the black dress of mourning.

It was important for me to remember these victims and honour their memory by marching in this dress. These few faces, however, are a far cry from the actual number of women and children killed by men in South Africa.

During the march, I also wore shackles around my wrists chained to a neck brace. This symbolises that we are imprisoned by the daily fight and fear against GBV while perpetrators walk free, either because they are never caught or get released on bail and parole.

Figure 4.8: Carin Bester's explanation of her "My Body My Life for 16 days of Activism" performance, 2017

For example, in Figures 4.4 and 4.5, her artworks highlight Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and other issues perceived as oppressive to women, children and the LGBTQIA+ community. Her works are not only limited to the issues mentioned above; her artistic expression is delicately aimed at starting a dialogue around the pressing issues which are the thrust of her performance in her artworks. To achieve this, Carin

utilises dress code to create an artistic expression through performance and make people aware of the issues that face different communities.

4.2 RESPONSES FROM THE THREE FOCUS GROUP INFORMANTS

Cresswell (2003:191-195) provides the steps employed in transcribing and analysing responses of data from research information as transcribing interviews and arranging data into themes. The themes are used in constructing the structure of the major findings in qualitative studies, reflecting the overall meaning of the general sense of the information obtained. They are also used to discover the general idea from the collected information and synthesise the information to develop the storylines by interconnecting the themes and, finally, by interpreting and making meaning of the data through qualitative analysis.

The random sampling technique, coupled with the convenience sampling technique of the non-probability sampling method used in this study, did not have age specifications or limits. The sampling technique was based on the knowledge that was much needed in this study from the participants. It is also important to note that the sampling techniques did not dictate the outlook of the age representation. It dictated the people to be picked through random sampling coupled with convenience sampling from the non-probability sampling method. The aim of the sampling techniques was to excavate genuine or authentic information from the available and willing participants.

The responses from the participants were generally unanimous, providing a strong indication of consensus on the topic at hand. However, it is essential to consider that even though the responses were unanimous, there were still some subtle variations in individual perspectives and experiences, such as the association of a cigarette with a French woman. Some participants provided contradictory responses on certain aspects of this study, such as interpreting the chandelier as light and some as shadow associated with bringing trouble, not light. This was despite the overall consensus among the majority of participants regarding other interpretations. This could be due to various factors, such as differences in personal experiences, knowledge, or biases. Regardless of the reasons for these contradictions, it is important to acknowledge and address them in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of perspectives on the topic being studied.

The responses gathered during the interviews were categorised according to the developing themes. The identified themes were utilised in addressing the stated aims and objectives of this study while providing answers to the research question and sub-questions. The participants responded uninhibitedly to semi-structured questions that appeared to be unveiling the concealed terms and occurrences. Some of the questions were responded to in a speculative manner. Upon further probing, the participants showed signs of conflicting with some of their prior assertions. Further probing kept unveiling some of the coverings that concealed their learned perceptions stored in their memories. After this uncovering, some participants were eager to reject Eurocentric lenses and indirectly induced the researcher to see reality through open-ended interpretations and meanings in clothing through the theories of the Sublime and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) relational aesthetics.

4.2.1 Profile of Participants

This section presents the biographical information of the three focus groups engaged in the research. They are categorised as: Group A, Group B, and Group C, with 5 participants in each group. All the focus groups participants were randomly assembled from Northwest University at Mahikeng Campus. They are all Postgraduate students who can decode and understand English as well as speak it fairly well. Group A comprised students who have studied for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Communication, Group B studied for a Bachelor of Education (Bed) in Senior and Further Education and Training, while Group C studied for a Bachelor of Social Sciences (BSocSc) qualifications, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 presents biographical information of the participants, whose ages range from 24 to 27 years. , and all are students from the North West University at Mahikeng Campus. There are 11 females and 4 males. Of the 11 females, 7 were Black, 2 Coloureds, 1 Indian and 1 White. Although the plan was to have representation from all nine South African provinces, only six were represented.

Table 4.1: Profile of the three cohorts of the participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Race	Province	City
A ₁	24	Female	Black	Gauteng	Centurion
A ₂	25	Male	Black	Eastern Cape	Gqeberha
A ₃	26	Female	Black	Eastern Cape	New Brighton
A ₄	24	Female	Black	Free State	Bloemfontein
A ₅	24	Female	Coloured	Eastern Cape	Gqeberha
B ₁	27	Female	Black	Eastern Cape	Umtata
B ₂	24	Female	Black	Northern Cape	Kimberly
B ₃	25	Male	Black	Eastern Cape	Gqeberha
B ₄	24	Female	Indian	KwaZulu-Natal	Durban
B ₅	25	Male	White	Gauteng	Pretoria
C ₁	26	Female	Black	Gauteng	Pretoria
C ₂	26	Female	Black	Free State	Sasolburg
C ₃	26	Female	White	North West	Potchefstroom
C ₄	26	Male	Black	North West	Mafikeng
C ₅	24	Female	Coloured	Gauteng	Randburg

4.3 FOCUS GROUPS' RESPONSES ON THE THREE PERFORMANCES

The participants from groups A, B, and C became the primary audience who decoded and gave their interpretations of the performances by Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe, Carin Bester, and sculptures by Yinka Shonibare, Mary Sibande and Nandipha Mntambo representing viewers.

4.3.1 Group A's interpretation of Steven Cohen's performance

Figure 4.9 shows a close-up still photo of Steven Cohen dressed in a chandelier as a costume for his performance in 2001. Participant A₁ first identifies Steven Cohen as a gay, white male.

Participant A₂ was of the opinion that Steven Cohen was playing the race card by portraying himself as a light (European) in the shadow (Black community). Participant A₂ further mockingly dislike the nakedness of Steven Cohen by saying, "Maybe the clothes did not exist back then". In other words, Participant A₂'s opinion is that by virtue of being white, Steven Cohen is undermining the Black community by parading his nakedness.



Figure 4.9: Steven Cohen, Chandelier (2001) at Caroline Suzman

Participant A₁ thinks that Steven Cohen's performance is a symbol of enlightenment, where he performs as its transmitter while the predominantly black community plays as the receivers. Participant A₁ also assumes that through his performance, Steven Cohen is bringing light or enlightening the predominantly black community about something through the usage of a chandelier as a dress. The usage of the high heel shoes make Steven Cohen look uncomfortable. Participant A₁ views it as discomfort from both sides. As much as Steven Cohen is the symbol of the person who is bringing light to a black community, he himself is not comfortable.

The usage of the high heels as the platform, as Participant A₁ puts it, shows discomfort to the transmitter of enlightenment as "he could not walk swiftly". On the other hand, the receivers are also uncomfortable, as Participant A₂ observes,

Me I think it's about change. It brings about change to that environment because I saw there, that old... That mother there, she even chased him away. You know that some changes are somewhat uncomfortable, so we don't just easily accept or adapt to a change.

This simply means that some of the receivers find it difficult to accept the change or enlightenment that is brought by the transmitter.

After the participants were shown Steven Cohen's explanation of Chandelier in Figure 4.2, Participant A₁ was of the view that Steven Cohen's performance is tone-deaf. Participant A₁'s views that Steven Cohen's interpretation is tone-deaf expressed it in the following manner:

I think what we can say, though, is that the contrast, which is the last point, the contrasting was effective, so evident. We can see the white versus black, rich and poor, shadow and light private, that is clear, but I think.

Even though Participant A₁ views the contrast as clear, she still finds Steven Cohen's interpretation as unclear. She further imagines that the enlightenment and development that people claim to bring to poor communities are half horrible because of the consequences where people die. On the other hand, Participant A₂ asserts that the performance is about the shadow and can be related to him bringing trouble to the squatter camp. The chandelier does not represent the light if you are going to take the comfortability of other people and this does not mean he is the light.

4.3.2 Focus Group B's interpretation of Steven Cohen's performance

All the participants responded. B₁ was of the view that the chandelier is used as a dress to symbolise light. Her view on Steven Cohen's performance is that it symbolises someone who is bringing light into a particular environment. Participant B₃ interprets this light as follows:

Mm-hmm! In the context of the chandelier, the title says, "to bring light". I would like... I interpret it in a way such as you can use your clothes as a way to convey a message. For instance, during the GBV protests that normally happen, you'd find that women are walking around topless and to them that's the way of bringing light to make... to just try and change the status quo (Participant B₃).

Although he did not specify the kind of light symbolised by Steven Cohen's performance, Participant B₃ compares the performance with the protests that are staged by women against Gender-Based Violence (GBV) when they use and/or omit clothes to make a statement. So, Steven Cohen may be bringing light on the issue of

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and many other gender and sexual identities (LGBTQIA+). While Participant B₃ is of the view that the light that Steven Cohen is bringing is based on LGBTQIA+, Participant B₄ views it as the statement on GBV that is illuminated.

In support of this idea, Participant B₂ states that “a chandelier is a type of decoration or light that is always placed at a higher platform”. Therefore, by wearing a chandelier, Steven Cohen symbolises light. The interaction between Steven Cohen and the audiences depicts that even when one is bringing light to the community, it is not easily welcomed by the receivers. She further unpacks the symbolism in the performance as follows:

And he also bowed a bit somewhere to, I don't know, sort of acknowledge them and also would like them to acknowledge him back, kind of thing (Participant B₂).

This simply means that in his performance, Steven Cohen showed acknowledgement with the intention to receive it back. What he received was mixed emotions because some rejected him while others supported him. Steven Cohen is described as a person who is bringing light; those who reject him are rejecting light. Participant B₂ speaks to the reason of this negative response as follows:

Yeah, I think it's hard to bring something that is different and that stands out into a situation or society because people, when they see something different, don't necessarily take kindly to it, and they don't really accept it that easily. So, maybe that's what he is trying to do.

This simply means that it is not easy to accept and adapt to the changes that take one out of her/his norms and traditions. After getting Steven Cohen's interpretation, Participant B₁ acknowledges that apart from him being a performer, she sees his gay disposition because of his high heels, makeup and posture. In contrast to Participant B₁, Participant B₂ points out high heels and lingerie types of panty as the characteristics of gays.

High heels, make-up, posture, and lingerie are characteristics of gays, as portrayed by Steven Cohen, Participant B₁ points out. In a bid to justify her point about the high heels as one of the characteristics of gays, she says they are “worn to represent a certain image compared to the normal heels that women would wear”. Participant B₂ highlights the fact that the performance stage that Steven Cohen is on is a squatter camp where people are congested. Participant B₁ takes offence when Africa is always shown as a slum because there are beautiful African parts. Participant B₂ elaborates on this idea clearly when she says:

But I think... it's not about, again, gender-based violence. It's more about the social differences where you get people that are upper class and then get people at lower classes. Now he's bringing this upper-class style or whatever into this lower-class level, right? So, we as black, as low class, we are not comfortable because of the realities that we're living in. It's not about what he is dressed or whatsoever, but what the hell are you doing in our area with that whole representation? (Participant B₂)

In his performance as a White person using the squatter camp as a stage, Steven Cohen represents the upper class, while the Black people in the squatter camp represent the lower class. With his chandelier as a dress, high heels, make-up, posture, and lingerie, Participant B₂ views him as bringing the upper-class style into the lower-class level. In accord with this idea, Participant B₄ states that high heels represent “the richer class or the luxurious class on a pedestal in comparison to the people in poverty”. Therefore, besides the chandelier symbolising light, combined with high heels, make-up, posture, and lingerie represent social difference (Participant B₂). According to Participant B₂, the rejection that Steven Cohen got from his audience (Black people) shows that Black people feel discomfort from the upper class because of the lower class level they are in. To put this into perspective, Participant B₂ compares this situation to a cousin from the city who has an iPhone and scorns the rural people who are still using the Samsung phone. This implies that the iPhone is seen as the representation of upper-class life while the Samsung phone represents the lower class. Conclusively, Participant B₂ thinks that the performance is in concurrence with what happened with the planners who plan for the squatter camp people, which they do not know nor live in.

Steven Cohen's performance portrays the difference between the upper class and lower class as well as the difference between planners of squatter camps and the slum area. While Steven Cohen and his performance represent the upper class and planners, the black people represent the lower class and slum areas. Furthermore, Participant B₂ views the performance of Steven Cohen as the contrast between Africa and Europe, as represented in Table 4.2 below.

Table: 4.2 Racial differences

Racial difference	
Africa	Europe
Black	White
Poor	Rich
Shadow	Light

This implies that from the performance, one can depict Europe versus Africa, meaning that one can experience Whites versus Blacks and light versus shadow. In other words, Steven Cohen is representing Europe and, in most cases, claims to bring light to Black people who are thought or considered by White people who are rich to be in the shadow and are poor by. So, besides it being a social difference, Participant B₂ also views it as a racial difference. While Participant B₂ views shadow as the representation of Black people, she also sees it as the representation of Steven Cohen as follows:

The shadow can be him bringing trouble into the squatter camps... that he can be the shadow. And by the chandelier it also doesn't represent light if you're going to take away comfortability of other people. It doesn't mean you're the light. He can be the literal light, what you said, but not the figurative... the actual light (Participant B₂).

Instead of Steven Cohen representing light as depicted in Table 4.2, he could be representing the shadow because he might be bringing troubles to the squatter camp.

Discomfort as the negative representation brought by Steven Cohen through the shadow. This implies that what can be viewed as a good thing on the other side could

be seen as troublesome and also bring discomfort on the other side. This view is also supported by Participant B₄ when she states:

As you spoke about the chandelier, it represents light, and some people are uncomfortable with situations or something that they may not know. So, in terms of him educating the community, he's giving them a different perspective to look at... (Participant B₄).

Participant B₄ noticed that some of the audience of Steven Cohen's performance were not comfortable. This might be because what he is presenting may perhaps be against African traditions and norms. Therefore, tempering other people's traditions and norms can make the receivers view it as putting their traditions and norms in trouble, and they may become uncomfortable. Although Africans have a history of being half-naked, they do not have a history where their nakedness is portrayed in public. Participant B₅ views walking around naked as the extremity of both the higher (extreme luxury) and lower (extreme poverty) classes without the middle ground where they meet. This makes the squatter camp people see it as trouble, and they are uncomfortable about it, hence the rejection. Participant B₂ feels strongly about this point when she says:

Private and public... Eh! (Everyone laughter) And why was he kind of semi-naked? Why was he naked? Why are you showing me your lingerie things? (Everyone laughter) Why aren't you dressed in a suit? You get those jumpsuits that are maybe not transparent but semi-nude vibes. Why did he decide to go naked to people? And another thing, us as black people, we're not comfortable seeing a person that's just going to walk around naked and. Are you trying to make me uncomfortable in my very own space? What are you trying to achieve? (Participant B₂).

The perception is that it is un-African if it's not inhumane to show private parts in public. So according to Participant B₂, transparency of the private parts is what is viewed as trouble and bringing discomfort to the squatter camp. Participant B₂ compares this with people who would promise people that they are going to empower them without revealing the meaning and the end goal of such empowerment.

After the participants were shown Steven Cohen's explanation of Chandelier in Figure 2, the discussion among the participants in Group B was filled with thought-provoking

observations and questions about the artist's interpretation. Laughter punctuated the tense moments as they delved into the nuances of the artist's representation of Europe and Africa, rich and poor, as well as private and public spaces. A point of contention arose when the participants discuss the representation of Africa as a place of poverty and slums, with some expressing frustration at the lack of acknowledgement of the diverse and prosperous parts of the continent. This led to an important debate about the portrayal of extreme poverty and extreme luxury, with the absence of a middle ground being noted as a significant oversight in the performance. For example, participant B₂ questioned the authenticity of the representation of informal settlements by individuals who have never experienced living in such conditions. She also raised concerns about the artist's decision to be semi-naked and how it made both black and white people uncomfortable.

Participant B₅ added to the conversation by highlighting the extremity of the portrayal of luxury and poverty, noting that it failed to capture the middle ground where the two meet. Furthermore, participant B₁ echoed this sentiment and questioned why Africa is always shown as a slum when there are also affluent parts. Additionally, the symbolism of the artist's choice of clothing, particularly the wearing of high heels, is analysed. Participants question whether the heels serve to represent the elevation of the wealthy class above those living in poverty, adding another layer of complexity to the interpretation of the performance. Overall, the participants' discussion underscores the complexities and challenges of tackling sensitive and complex themes in art, offering valuable insights into the impact of such representations on individuals and communities. It serves as a reminder of the power of art to provoke meaningful dialogues and reflections on the world around us.

4.3.3 Group C's interpretation of Steven Cohen's performance

Participant C₁ thought that the performance was about bringing light to the dark place. Steven Cohen was trying to bring light to negate the dark things that included terrible things. Participant C₁ was of the view that bringing light could be done in different ways, which was portrayed by other audiences who were upset, while some found it humorous.

Other than bringing light to dark things, as Participant C₁ pointed out, Participant C₂ asserted that Steven Cohen was bringing the crossdressing and LGBTQIA+ subject to light. She arrived at this idea because of the make-up and how Steven Cohen was dressed. Participant C₂ further stated that the reception that Steven Cohen received was the reality that happens in squatter camps. People who cross-dress are possibly frowned upon because it is not the squatter camp's phenomenon.

On the other hand, participant C₃ was of the view that while the chandelier was supposed to symbolise the bringing of light, there was a lot that is happening that blocks the light symbolism, such as the tingling. She further asserts that:

You focus on the tingling that it loses its purpose. So, for me, ... the chandelier will symbolise the rich people who are supposed to bring the life to the poor people, because they are supposed to give help to those in need. But instead, they are just decorative. They are just there to look at instead of bringing something useful (Participant C₃).

The chandelier symbolises the rich people who were supposed to give help to those in need. The tingling on the chandelier managed to draw attention from the audience, but there was nothing to gain thereafter.

After the participants were shown Steven Cohen's interpretations the symbolism of a chandelier brought up thought-provoking points about the role of the rich in helping the poor and the importance of effective messages in providing support. Participant C₃ associated the chandelier with the rich, suggesting that they are meant to bring light and life to those in need. However, she observed that there is often so much excess and distraction surrounding the rich that their true purpose of providing aid is overshadowed. In her interpretation, the chandelier symbolises the wealthy individuals who are supposed to bring hope and support to the less fortunate, but instead, they are merely decorative and do not fulfil their intended purpose. Furthermore, Participant C₃'s perspective sheds light on the disparity between the wealthy and those in need, emphasising the idea that the rich are meant to be a source of assistance but often fail to fulfil that role. Her interpretation invites reflection on the responsibility of the privileged to actively contribute to the well-being of others rather than simply existing as symbols of wealth.

Participant C₂ extended the discussion by considering the way assistance is provided to communities in need. She questioned whether the methods of message and support are truly valuable and accessible to those who require aid. Both Participants C₂'s and C₃'s perspectives resonate with broader societal issues surrounding the provision of aid and support to marginalised communities. Their insights encourage a critical examination of the motives and methods employed by individuals and entities in positions of privilege and influence. Furthermore, their ideas prompt a re-evaluation of how assistance is delivered, emphasising the necessity of tailoring resources to align with the practical needs and circumstances of the recipients.

4.3.4 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Steven Cohen

This part seeks to blend the collective reaction from the three groups on the interpretations of Steven Cohen's artworks. Interestingly, in interpreting the chandelier, the three cohorts were in harmony to view it as the representation of light. However, they view the representation of this light in different ways: first, that this light is being brought by Steven Cohen, that he is the light himself, and third, that the light is a means of playing a race card.

The three cohorts combined hold the view that the performance is about Steven Cohen using the chandelier as a symbol of him bringing the light. From this interpretation, Steven Cohen is viewed as the transmitter of the message (idea, thought or information) to communicate to the Black community as the receivers. The message that is transmitted is the enlightenment of something, and Steven Cohen chose artistic performance as the medium. The chandelier is the code through which Steven Cohen used to encode the message. The Black community decode this message differently.

The bringing of light may be viewed from both the positive and negative positions. This is confirmed by the participants who stated that the receipt of light was decoded with mixed emotions where some of the audience found it offensive while others found it humorous. This implies that while some audiences perceived Steven Cohen as transmitting light from a positive position, others understood him as bringing light from a negative position.

Bringing of light from the positive position

- ***Negation of dark things***

Using the chandelier as the symbol of light, Steven Cohen is bringing light to the squatter camp which is symbolised as a dark place. This implies that Steven Cohen is bringing light to negate darkness. It is in the dark place where the dark things, such as social ills and terrible things, are happening. According to some of the participants, the squatter camp in Steven Cohen's performance represents darkness about the black community implying that most dark things are associated with poverty and substandard housing of squatter camps.

- ***Conscientisation of LGBTQIA+***

Using the chandelier as the symbol of light, Steven Cohen is bringing light to the squatter camp to conscientise them about cross-dressing and LGBTQIA+ subjects. Besides the chandelier, Steven Cohen, as a male (gay), is wearing high heels and lingerie, which are stereotyped as female clothing. The interpretation by the participants is that one of the lights that Steven Cohen is bringing is the cross-dressing discourse as he is a Gay man making awareness about his sexual orientation or on behalf of the gay community.

- ***Conscientisation of GBV***

Some of the participants compare Steven Cohen's performance with the protests usually staged by women against Gender-Based Violence. The springboard to this line of comparison is the fact that Steven Cohen is parading with the chandelier as a dress with no other item to cover his body except the high-heeled shoes. Participant B₃ compares nakedness with Rhodes University's and the Witwatersrand University's students who staged a naked protest by womxn, which was met with police resistance. However, Steven Cohen did not only use the nakedness to be listened to but he also used the tingling of the chandelier to draw attention from the audience. If Steven Cohen were indeed bringing light on LGBTQIA+, the interpretation would be that he used the same strategy used by the naked protestors as well as the tingling of the chandelier for him to be heard.

While the tingling is interpreted as a strategy to draw the attention of the audience, some participants believe that it can also be a barrier to what is being communicated saying, the tingling blocks the light. The tingling became the factor or element on which the audience focused on, defusing its purpose of bringing the light.

- ***Discomfort on nakedness***

The fact that Steven Cohen portrays himself as light through the chandelier dress, his nakedness wipes out the good intentions that he had. His parading around naked undermines the black community because it is taboo to walk around naked in their community. It is worse when it is done by a White person who is known to hold a different view about the topless dressing during apartheid or colonisation. This simply means that if this were performed by an African female, it would be seen as a way of protesting against the GBV pandemic, but due to the fact that it is done by a white person who is viewed to have a negative view on the topless dressing, it is found to be ambiguous. Although it is being performed by a person who considers himself feminine, the fact that it is portrayed by a white person erases the positive message that was intended to be sent.

Bringing of light from the negative position

- ***Portrayal of class***

Participants view Steven Cohen's performance as the representation of white, rich, light versus black, poor, and shadow, respectively. By parading with the chandelier, Steven Cohen was showing off his class as white, which is equal to the rich, to the black community, which is equal to the poor. This implies that there is inequality between white and black nations, and the gap between rich and poor still persisted in the democratic era. This suggests that if indeed the audience of Steven Cohen were interpreting his performance as him showing off the class difference, they were reminded of apartheid and the inequality they were subjected to even during the democratic dispensation. In other words, the light (richness) is just passing and leaving them in their shadow (poverty).

- ***Steven claims to be light***

The participants hold the view that the performance is about Steven Cohen positioning himself as the light. From this interpretation, Steven Cohen is viewed as the message (idea, thought or information) sent by the unidentified sender to communicate to the Black community as the receivers. The message that is transmitted is the enlightenment of something, and Steven Cohen chose artistic performance as the medium. Body as the performative element dressed in a chandelier is the code through which Steven Cohen used to encode the message. The Black community decode this message differently. To the audience who are historically conscious, Steven Cohen, as the light, might have reminded them of this historical conquest. The conquest was subsequent to the whites invading of African territory, claiming to enlighten the African community through the Gospel. Therefore, Steven Cohen was viewed as the representation of Europe.

- ***Discomfort***

While Steven Cohen is viewed as the light, some of the participants stated that he could as well be viewed as the shadow because he brings trouble into the squatter camps and disturbs their comfort. The discomfort is shown by the audience, who chase him away. Although the reason behind them chasing him, it may be assumed that it was because he was parading naked across the squatter camp. Some participants viewed the discomfort from the wearing of high heels first as a sign of homosexuality that is not welcomed at the squatter camp and that he could not walk swiftly. Participants are of the view that Steven Cohen is transmitting a particular message that he is also not comfortable in communicating. His discomfort might have been prompted by the anxiety of not knowing how the audience would receive his message. It means that even though there is an audience who rejected his message, there are some who might have received it well and/or have just supported it. This implies that Steven Cohen, whether right or wrong, was protected by the South African constitution and has the freedom of speech to convey his message or ideas through artistic creativity.

Light with racial connotations

The participants hold the view that the performance is about Steven Cohen using light as a race card. As a White conveyer of a particular message, he chose a wrong medium of transmission. Choosing nakedness made the receivers (audience) to find it awkward when it is done by a White person. This simply means that if this were performed by an African female, it would be seen as a way of protesting against the GBV pandemic. However, due to the fact that it was done by a white person who is viewed to have a negative view of topless dressing, it is found to be ambiguous.

4.3.5 Group A's interpretation of Wezile Mgibe's performance

Participants A₁, A₂, A₃ and A₄ responded, while participant A₅ did not react to Wezile Mgibe's performance. However, participants A₁, A₂, and A₃ have not much to say except that Wezile Mgibe's costume gives the interpretation of him being a female.

Participant A₁ identified a bandage and a dress, and Participant A₄ added the bow without identifying the cigarette. In contrast to the fact that Wezile Mgibe is a black male performer, Participant A₁ sees him using the bandage to represent a White person, a dress to represent a female and a cigarette to represent a French woman. Participant A₁ states:

... could the use of a bandage on his face not be a way to show colour? I mean, he's a black man. He could be trying to show race, portraying race through the bandage, so he's a white woman in that instance ... (Participant A₁).

On the contrary, Participant A₄ views Wezile Mgibe's performance as being about looking into other people's deaths. She further states that the bandages on the performer might be saying that he has something to do with "whatever happened to all the victims".

Participant A₁ arrives at the conclusion that Wezile Mgibe is portraying a woman because of the dress and asserts:

The type of dress as well, the pearls on his dress, it looks almost like an Elizabethan... Yeah I know he doesn't have the hips but I think... (Participant A₁)



Figure 4.10: Wezile Mgibe, *Collecting bodies* (2019)

Even though, as a man, Wezile Mgibe has no hips, Participant A₁, says through his Elizabethan dress that has pearls on it, he portrays a woman of a particular class. Participant A₄ views the cigarette as a symbol of an investigative person because, according to her, “in those American movies the investigators always have that cigarette”.

By Wezile Mgibe as a performer going to the car, it shows that as an investigator he failed to solve the problem of providing justice for the victims. Because of this, he feels that the weight is on him and the blood on his hands. Participant A₄ also sees the cigarette that Wezile Mgibe just holds without smoking as the symbol to represent the light that he is holding. On the other hand, Participant A₁ views the cigarette as a symbol to portray the white woman as follows:

Despite the level of class, I think, in a French setting, it was giving me French vibes, honestly, because French women love cigarettes... (Participant A₁).

Based on these three symbols, Participant A₁ conclusively gets the sense that Wezile Mgibe is portraying the race or the struggles of white women, and French women in particular because of the cigarette and the French setting. It is Participant A₁'s belief that even though French women, regardless of class, are pretty learned, they can also encounter social violence since it does not choose whom to harm.

The bow that Wezile Mgibe does in his performance is viewed as a homonymous symbol representing the giving of thanks, as well as the bowing "to the law or the justice system".

After the participants were shown Wezile Mgibe's explanation in Figure 4.5, they all agreed with the artist's explanation. Participant A₁ expresses confusion and curiosity about the performance, highlighting its effectiveness in invoking a sense of intrigue. Participant A₁ acknowledges that not knowing what to look for added to the experience of trying to figure out the meaning behind the performance. This demonstrates how the art piece successfully engages the viewer and sparks their curiosity to understand its deeper message.

Additionally, the discussion on the gender of the figure in the performance further emphasises diverse interpretations of the art piece. While Participants A₁, A₂ and A₃ all agree that the figure being presented is a female. Participant A₁ continues to elaborate on the effectiveness of the performance, explaining how the figure's accessories, such as pearl and clothing, can be interpreted differently depending on one's cultural background. A₁ further acknowledges that while some may perceive

these clothes and accessories as feminine, others may see them as a symbol of androgyny and fluidity. This discussion not only underscores the multi-layered nature of the performance but also illustrates how art can challenge and expand individual perspectives and preconceived notions. The interpretation by Group A participants highlights the effectiveness of Wezile Mgibe's performance in evoking curiosity, sparking discussions, and challenging traditional gender norms and perceptions. Their diverse perspectives and reactions to the art piece illustrate the power of art to engage and provoke thoughts, showcasing the impact of art in generating meaningful conversations and broadening individual perspectives.

Table 4.3: Symbols as identified by Participants A₁ and A₄

Symbol	Participant A ₁	Participant A ₄
Bandage	White race	Death
Bow		Giving thanks
		Bowing to the law or justice system
Cigarette	French woman	Investigative person
		Light
Dress	Female	

Table 4.3 shows that in their identification of symbols, Participants A₁ and A₄ commonly pinpointed bandages and cigarettes. Although they have a consensus on their identification of these two symbols, they have dissonance meaning. Participant A₁ views the bandage as a symbol of the white race, while Participant A₄ sees it as a representation of death.

Participant A₁ views the cigarette as a symbol of a French woman, while Participant A₄ sees it as a representation of either the investigative person or light. In their discord, Participant A₁ identifies dress, Participant A₄ identifies the bow. Participant A₁ views the dress as a symbol of females, while Participant A₄ sees the bow as a representation of either giving thanks or bowing to the law or justice system.

4.3.6 Group B's interpretation of Wezile Mgibe's performance

All the Participants reacted to Wezile Mgibe's performative art, where he wrapped a bandage around his head and face and wore an Elizabethan dress. Participant B₁ sees Wezile Mgibe's performance as the representation of his own death as he

represents himself as a mummy through the usage of the bandage. Participant B₃ holds the same view of the representation of death through Wezile Mgibe's performance. His evidence for this conclusion is the fact that one person was wearing a white thing, which Participant B₃ interprets as a coffin. Participant B₅ holds the same view of the representation of death when he states that "it's like a walking corpse with a cigarette".

Concerning the representation of his own death, Participant B₁ also sees Wezile Mgibe's performance as the embodiment of education that is white (Eurocentric). Participant B₁ views the bow that Wezile Mgibe made as a symbol of bowing down to knowledge to uplift his mind. Participant B₁'s interpretation of the papers that surround the chair that Wezile Mgibe walks towards and looks at represents the content of Eurocentric education. Participant B₂ narrates her interpretation as follows:

Me, I will link it with violence, gender-based violence or whatsoever, because next to the body you can see there's a box of a match, there's a box of something, right? He or she was killed by whatsoever that we don't know, right, and now this person is wounded, is covered with bandages and whatsoever. I feel like he or she is an angel and he's overlooking at everything that is happening. And with the... where there's a stool and papers around, I feel like those papers lying everywhere are the investigations about the deaths and whatsoever but nothing is going forward; It's in a circle form because of everything is just going in same place in a circular form. And then where I'm losing it is where... Okay, I kind of get it, where he's on a white carpet and where there are traces of blood behind him or her. And then in that... where he's bowing in front of that head, I think that he's maybe saying that the law or the justice failed me but thank you, I'm already dead (Participant B₂).

Participant B₂ views Wezile Mgibe's performance as a discourse on GBV against the failure of law. In concurrence, Participant B₃ agrees with Participant B₂ that the performance is about the awareness against GBV. Participant B₂ observes the matchbox, bandages, a human body drawn on the ground and traces of blood on the carpet behind Wezile Mgibe as the symbols of violence, while papers around the chair and bowing represent the law.

Participant B₂ links Wezile Mgibe's performance to GBV. Participant B₃ concurs with the idea of interpreting this performance as the GBV discourse, which is linked to the coffin depicted by the white cloth as follows:

And where they wrote 365 days, and for me, that was a visual representation of the realities faced by women in South Africa, that they are basically a little coffin in the sense that their lives are not valued and they're not protected because of GBV. They fight lots of battles: they have to fight patriarchy amongst other battles so yeah (Participant B₃).

Taking a cue from the "365 days" written, Participant B₃ is of the view that Wezile Mgibe's performance depicts that GBV is the reality faced by women in South Africa. They are little "warm bodies" coffins as the possible victims of GBV, where their lives are not valued nor protected due to patriarchy.

Although Participant B₂ thinks that Wezile Mgibe is portraying the character of a female judging from the earrings and the dress, Participant B₃ has the following view:

I think it goes back to the topic of the study as to dress code as a social, how it's socially constructed... because we are not certain whether it's a male or female. Some are saying it's female solely on the fact that it's a dress so yeah. But it's a man (Participant B₃).

Participant B₃ is of the view that Wezile Mgibe could be viewed as both female and as a man. Viewing Wezile Mgibe as a female is perceived by B₂ as a wounded female because of the bandages covering the character and as an angel who is overlooking what is happening.

In her interpretation, Participant B₂ is of the view that the law is unable to solve this problem. Her evidence from Wezile Mgibe's performance is the papers that are around the chair. The "just going in the same place in a circular form" Participant B₂ shows that nothing is moving forward to solve the problem. Lastly, when Wezile Mgibe bows, Participant B₂ sees that as a symbol for saying "that the law or justice failed me, but thank you". In a nutshell, Participant B₂'s view is that Wezile Mgibe was wounded because of GBV, died and became an angel who sought justice, but the law failed and bowed out. Participant B₄ holds a different view about the bowing and says Wezile Mgibe is "bowing down to a man's head that was placed on that chair" as a symbol of

giving thanks to that head. Participant B₄ further views the cigarette that is not smoked as the representation of holding power or light.

After the participants were shown the explanation of the performance from Wezile Mgibe Figure 4.5, the group discussion revealed a dynamic and engaging conversation about the artwork. Participant B₂ expresses frustration at not being able to pin down the meaning of the art despite trying to break down its different elements. Her statement reflects the complexity and depth of the artwork, as well as the challenge of interpreting it. The group then shares a moment of light-heartedness when Participant B₁ humorously points out that Participant B₂ did not mention the cigarette in their analysis. This comment reflects the group's camaraderie and comfortable atmosphere, allowing for playful interactions even in a discussion about a serious subject such as art interpretation.

Participant B₂ emphasises the difficulty of analysing the artwork, highlighting the various elements that are open to interpretation. This suggests that the artwork is multi-layered and prompts viewers to engage in deeper thought and contemplation. Participant B₃ brings up the topic of dress code as a social construct and its influence on how the figure in the artwork is perceived. The group deliberates on whether the figure is male or female, with Participant B₃ pointing out the ambiguity created by the dress and the uncertainty of the figure's gender. This discussion touches on the themes of gender identity and societal norms, demonstrating the group's thought-provoking analysis of the artwork.

Participant B₂ further contributes to the discussion by highlighting the significance of the earrings and dress code in judging the figure's gender. Her comments indicate the group's attention to detail and their exploration of the symbolism within the artwork. The group's ongoing questioning and speculation about the artwork demonstrates their engagement and determination to unravel its meaning. Participant B₃'s statement at the end of the discussion, "or keep on guessing", encapsulates the group's persistent and inquisitive approach to interpreting the artwork. This ongoing curiosity and willingness to explore different possibilities reflect the group's commitment to thoroughly understanding the artwork.

In conclusion, the group discussion on Wezile Mgibe's interpretation illustrates a thoughtful and engaging dialogue that delves into the complexities of the artwork. The participants' exploration of various elements and themes, as well as their camaraderie and inquisitive mindset, showcase their dedication to comprehensively analysing and understanding the artwork.

4.3.7 Group C's interpretation of Wezile Mgibe's performance

Participants C₁, C₂, C₃ and C₄ responded, while C₅ did not react to Wezile Mgibe's performance, where he wrapped a bandage around his head and face, and wore an Elizabethan dress.

Participant C₁ thinks that the bandage that is wrapped around the head represents a lot of mental ills because of its volume. To further justify the representation of the mental ills is the fact that the bandage is only wrapped around the head while the body is covered by a dress. To the contrary, Participant C₃ puts the interpretation of the bandage as follows:

The fact that we put a bandage over everything in society. Instead of addressing the actual cause of it ... we just put a bandage on something we don't actually fix it (Participant C₃).

Therefore, a bandage represents a temporal solution that is not meant to solve the problem permanently. Contrary to the two participants, C₁ and C₃, Participant C₄ interprets the bandage as follows:

..., the covering of the face, you know. Maybe that could be like a cocoon. You know when a butterfly, a caterpillar, grows into a butterfly. You are trying to show that you are coming out to show that this is the new you (Participant C₄).

In other words, Participant C₄ sees the usage of the bandage as a symbol of transforming oneself into becoming a new self.

According to Participant C₄'s analogy, like a cocoon, Wezile Mgibe is wrapped with a bandage during the performance. This simply means that before he could become a cocoon, he was a caterpillar, that is, before the performance. While after the cocoon,

he becomes a butterfly, that is, after the performance. However, in her interpretative narration about the bandage representing the mental ills, Participant C₁ is of the view that the mental ills were a result of the trauma caused by the dead bodies, as represented by a tape. The blood that is on the ground could mean that Wezile Mgibe killed them, hence the trauma.

Participant C₂ tried to connect the head to the chair, and Wezile Mgibe's head was wrapped with a bandage. She is of the view that Wezile Mgibe lost himself to the world and its expectations of him. Participant C₃ interprets the books as social theories that explain and simplify humanity theoretically instead of lived reality. Going back to Participant C₂, in her interpretation, she has a lot of questions that she is posing. Participant C₂ comments that being a male dressed in a dress also has to do with him losing himself, which raises the question of whether he is true to himself or losing himself. Some of the questions that Participant C₂ has in relation to the losing of oneself are:

are you comfortable as you are now that you are dressed in female clothes or what or does the world inform who you are? (Participant C₂).

Participant C₂ was speculating that Wezile Mgibe, as a male, might have been informed about who he is by the world that he is losing himself to. This is why she guesstimates that he may not be comfortable as a male in that dress. According to Participant C₂, the world is also dictating that certain titles cannot be used when addressing people just to be gender-neutral. Participant C₂ is of the view that it is not clear what Wezile Mgibe is interrogating and whether it is external or internal. Although it may seem to be an internal interrogation because the bandage is on Wezile Mgibe, Participant C₂ still feels that, that which is interrogated is external.

Then Participant C₂ conclusively stated that though "the work is great, deep and meaningful", its interpretation is ambiguous. Participant C₄ also concurred and stated that the performance is too broad and can mean anything. In support of Participant C₂ on the ambiguity of the interpretation, she also conclusively says, "Once something applies to everything, it loses its meaning".

After the participants were shown Wezile Mgibe's explanation in Figure 4.5, the discussion revolved around the interpretation of a character in relation to interrogation and the use of a dress and bandages. Participant C₂ asks whether the character is interrogating things, in himself or external things, indicating a desire for clarity on the focus of the interrogation.

Participant C₄ expressed the broadness of the concept, suggesting that it could mean anything and that when something applies to everything, it loses its meaning. This highlights the challenge of interpreting the character and the potential ambiguity in the performance. Participant C₂ echoed this sentiment, emphasising the difficulty in determining whether the interrogation is internal or external and expressing the view that the interpretation is not clear.

Overall, the group's discussion points to the complexity of interpreting the character in the performance. They grappled with the internal and external aspects of the interrogation, the potential symbolism of the dress code and the bandage, and the overall clarity of the interpretation. While they find the performance to be deep and meaningful, they also acknowledge the challenges in understanding and interpreting it effectively. The conversation brings to the fore the importance of clear message and intention in artistic expression, as well as the difficulty in conveying complex themes and symbols to the viewer.

4.3.8 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Wezile Mgibe

This section of the study seeks to blend the collective reaction from the three groups on the interpretations of Wezile Mgibe's performance. Interestingly, in interpreting the performances, the three groups were in harmony to view it as the representation of the GBV victims as well as the investigation.

(i) Symbols

Figure 4.10 above shows bandages, a dress, and cigarettes as the symbols that are used in Wezile Mgibe's performance. Participant A₁ identifies the bandages and the dress, and Participant A₄ adds the bow without identifying the cigarette. In contrast to the fact that Wezile Mgibe is a black male performer, Participant A₁ sees him using the bandage to represent a White person, the dress to represent a female and the

cigarette a French woman. On the symbolism of the bandage, Participant A₁ states, "Maybe he is looking into these deaths, but maybe he's not necessarily the person who died, but maybe he's carrying all these... whatever happened to all the victims, maybe he's carrying all of that with him, which is why he has these bandages and maybe he's a representation of all of that because he's using that to investigate".

Bandage

The participants were unanimous in identifying the bandage as one of the symbols and symbolising white race, a killer, death, violence, temporal solution, transformation and mental illness.

Some of the participants interpret the usage of the bandage as the portrayal of race, where a Black person, Wezile Mgibe, uses the white colour of the bandage to portray white skin. This can be interpreted as being a black woman who is portraying a white woman through the bandage. Some participants interpret the usage of the bandage as the portrayal of someone who is looking into other people's deaths suggesting that she/he has something to do with what happened to the victims.

Table 4.4: Symbols and their meanings in Wezile Mgibe's performance

Bandage	Earrings and dress	Cigarette	Bow	Car	Chair	Papers	Circle	Blood	Head
Race	Female character	Investigator	Giving thanks	Retirement facility	Eurocentric education	Eurocentric content	Infinity	Violence	Law
Killer		Light	Paying respect		Law	Investigation			Loosing oneself
Death		Woman	Bowing out			Theory			
Violence									
Temporal solution									
Transformation									
Mental ill									

Some participants interpret the usage of the bandage as the portrayal of death, probably her own. It could be that Wezile Mgibe was killed by Anonymous, and she is wounded. Hence, she is covered with a bandage. Or else the bandage is being used to portray her as a mummy. Therefore, the bandages around Wezile Mgibe's head and face may, in a way, symbolise his death and represent him as a mummy. Some participants translate the usage of the bandage as the portrayal of violence, specifically the GBV. This implies that Wezile Mgibe represents a woman who has her head wrapped with a bandage because she was injured during the GBV. Other participants translate the usage of the bandage as the representation of the temporal solution to a problem without solving it permanently. Although they did not specify what kind of a problem is given a temporal solution, they equate the putting of a bandage as a sign of not being ready to solve the problem.

Other participants translate the usage of the bandage as the representation of transformation like a butterfly Life Cycle with four stages that take place during the life metamorphosis. The first stage is an egg laid on a leaf by a butterfly. The egg then hatches into a caterpillar and, after it is fully grown, becomes a pupa inside the cocoon, which later becomes a butterfly. Therefore, the bandages that wrapped Wezile Mgibe's head and face are viewed as a cocoon. In other words, Wezile Mgibe is trying to show that this is the new him transformed from the preceding stage to the current.

Other participants translate the usage of the bandage as the representation of mental illness because it is only wrapped around the head while the body is covered by a dress. This means that Wezile Mgibe can be associated with a person who has a bandage around his head because of his health condition, which can be one or a combination of mental, behavioural or emotional disorders.

- ***Earrings and dress***

The participants described the earrings and the dress as socially constructed symbols that are worn by females. Although Wezile Mgibe is walking in a place where there are bodies lying around, he does not seem to be in a state of mourning but uses the earrings and a dress to portray the character of a female. The dress does not only portray a female, but because of its pearls, it portrays a woman of a particular class.

- **Cigarette**

The cigarette was one of the symbols that were discordantly interpreted as symbolising an investigator similar to American movies, a light, and a French woman, to be precise, because French women love cigarettes.

- **Bowing**

The bowing was observed as a form of respect, greeting and a symbol for giving thanks. Although the action of bowing can be viewed as a sign to give thanks, however one of the participants translates it as a statement that says, "The law or the justice failed me, but thank you". In other words, the action to "bowing out" is used as a symbol of withdrawing or retiring from life because of being disappointed by the malfunctioning of law or justice.

- **Car**

The action of going to the car was observed as a representation of failure or giving up. If the cigarette is viewed as the symbol that portrays an investigator, then going to the car shows that he is accepting defeat since the law or justice failed him in his bid to provide justice for the victims. Therefore, the car can be interpreted as a getting away tool.

- **Chair**

The chair was observed as a representation of Eurocentric education or law.

- **Papers**

Papers were observed as a symbol for the Eurocentric content, and that they depict an investigation, or a theory. In this case a theory is interlinked with education as well as investigation (academic and detective).

- **Circle**

the circle is identified as a symbol for infinity, and thus, the papers that are lying surrounding the chair create a circle of endless and going-in circles investigation.

- **Blood**

The blood is translated as a portrayal of violence involving bloodshed because this performance embodies a discourse on GBV where Wezile Mgibe can be viewed as a person who killed the victims.

- **Head**

Some of the participants interpret the human head as a symbol of law, or for the loss of oneself to the world and its expectations of him.

4.3.9 Group A's interpretation of Carin Bester's performance

Participants A₁, A₂, A₄ and A₅ responded, and Participant A₃ did not react to Carin Bester's performance. Participant A₁ has not much to say except that she has acknowledged the letter "x" in the word "womxn". Participant A₂ states that red colour on a white represents bloodshed associated with the scourge of GBV. Participant A₄ said the whole South African nation can see it, hence the usage of the South African National Anthem and Flag. This means that GBV has become that which defines the South African nation. According to Participant A₅, there are some noticeable aspects, which are (a) the faces of the dead victims of GBV who are printed on the dress of the performer, and (b) the blood stains on the flag.

Participant A₅ expressed concern that it is only women who participate in these kinds of marches, so it means that women are on their own in this fight. It is also important to note that Participant A₅ also perceived the LGBTQIA+ flag shows that even the LGBTQIA+ are abused.

After the researcher showed Carin Bester's performance interpretation Figure 4.8, only Participant A₁ responded to the artist's explanations by saying, "Mm-hmm, I saw that", referring to the word "womxn".



Figure 4.11: Carin Bester, My Body My Life for 16 days of Activism 2017 (Street Intervention) CBD and Parliament Cape Town Carin Bester, Dress of Remembrance for #TheTotalShutdownMarchAgainstGBV 2018 (Intervention Art) Streets of Cape Town

4.3.10 Group B's interpretation on Carin Bester's performance

Participants B₁, B₂, and B₄ responded and B₃ and B₅ did not react to Carin Bester's performance. Participants B₁, B₂ and B₄ are in harmony that the performance by Carin Bester is based on awareness about GBV. Participant B₄ commends the diversity of participants in the march, that it included disabled people and different races showing that the nation came together to shed light on GBV and the importance of these marches. In her interpretation, Participant B₂ is of the view that the white colour, which represents the purity of South Africa, is stained by death, which is represented by the

red colour (blood). Participant B₄ says she has noticed the letter “x” in the word “womxn”, which she says that it represents “intersectional feminism”. According to her, the intersectional feminism is about the inclusivity “of trans and non-binary women, equal treatment of women and men alike”. Participant B₂’s concern is that the effort against GBV is female-centred and she puts her point as follows:

We know it's about gender-based violence, however, I always have this thing about gender-based violence whereby why are we only focusing on women when we are talking about gender based? I know that most cases are with women, but why are we also not focusing other abuses that affect males? For example, if we're looking at the collage of pictures that he was posting at the last scene of the video, mostly it was women everywhere and maybe one or two small boys. Why doesn't she post also other men that died because of a woman shot, women shot men or something of that nature (Participant B₂).

This implies that Participant B₂ wants the concept of “gender-based” to be removed since violence is perpetuated against everyone regardless of gender. She also advocates for these kinds of awareness to become a 365-day phenomenon instead of being done from November to December. Participant B₄ thinks that the usage of the South African flag with blood is a way to draw a parallel between the current democratic dispensation and the apartheid era. During apartheid, people were dying, which resulted in the marches being organised. In the current democratic dispensation, South African women are dying senseless deaths in numbers because of GBV, which also results in marches being organised like this one in which Carin Bester was part.

After the participants were shown the interpretation of performance from Carin Bester, they had varying perspectives and interpretations of Carin Bester's performance. Participant B₁ expressed that she did not see anything in the performance that pointed to Black Friday. She was referring to the artist mentioning that the march was done on the Saturday after Black Friday. She felt that the focus of the performance was primarily on gender-based violence and suggested that it would have been better if Black Friday had been incorporated in a way that clearly displayed a shift in focus towards activism. She mentioned that she missed the online shopping part, indicating that she might have been expecting more explicit connections to Black Friday.

Participant B₂ emphasised the importance of focusing solely on activism and gender-based violence, suggesting that the performance was trying to bring awareness to these issues without getting side-tracked by other things like Black Friday. Participant B₄, who noted the use of the word “womxn” in the performance and mentioned intersectional feminism as a key theme, echoed this sentiment. Participant B₄ further explained that intersectional feminism aims to be inclusive of transgender and non-binary individuals and seeks equal treatment for women and men alike. This interpretation indicates a focus on the broader issues of gender equality and inclusivity rather than commercial events like Black Friday.

The participants of Group B highlighted the importance of prioritising activism on gender-based violence awareness over consumerism and commercial events. They also discussed the use of specific language in the performance, such as the term “womxn” and the emphasis on intersectional feminism as a means to promote inclusivity and equality. While some participants may have missed the connection to Black Friday in the performance, their interpretations reflect a deeper engagement with the themes of gender equality and social justice.

4.3.11 Group C’s interpretation of Carin Bester’s performance

Participants C₁, C₂, C₃ and C₄ responded and C₅ did not react to Carin Bester’s performance. Participant C₁ has a concern that in the march there is no male representation. She is of the view that the female would like their male counterparts to support them and pledge solidarity on what females are experiencing or going through. Participant C₁ views the 16 days as the days for women and children. Participant C₁ wonders about the symbolism and the sensitivity of the letter “x” in the word “womxn”. With precision, Participant C₄ states, “They started this thing in academia of not writing woman with an ‘a’ but with an ‘x’”. Participant C₄ further shows the calamity of using the letter “x” in the word “womxn” as follows;

This thing is genuinely problematic because now anyone can be a woman. But if you ask people what’s a woman they can’t define it. Like, it’s a problem because now we’re going to see this gender-based violence against women. But, the term woman applies to everyone, then it is an issue.

This means that in his eyes, Participant C₄ sees every man as a male (he) and every woman as a female (she). Besides faces and the South African rainbowed flag, Participant C₂ observes four colours but in a group of three, that is, white, red, and black paired with red. Participant C₂ gives the significance of these symbols in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5 Symbols and significance in the Carin Bester's march as per Participant C₂'s observation.

Symbol	Significance
White colour	Ghost
Red colour	Blood
Black and red colours	Meaning and emotions
Rainbow flag	Sexuality
Faces	Publicity

Participant C₂ states that the person who is painted in white represents a ghost of the people who were killed; the red colour painted over the dress represents the shedding of blood. People who are marching dressed in black and red represent a lot of meaning and emotions. Participant C₂ stated that this has a bit of contradiction where the expectation of the mood of the march is anticipated to be peaceful but on the other side, the rainbow paints a picture of the role players and gives the theme of the march. The role players are the LGBTQIA+ community, while the theme has to do with the sexuality of some of the GBV victims who are women and children. This notion is also supported by Participant C₄ who states that the South African rainbow coloured flag and the LGBTQ+ community flag in this march symbolise that the LGBTQ+ community is also a vulnerable one. According to Participant C₂, the faces that are shown towards the end of the video represent publicity. Participant C₂ states that the addition of the faces at the end of the video is another way of adding emotions to the public by saying that “these are actual people who were killed” and had families or loved ones.

Participant C₄ commented that because the theme of Carin Bester's march seems to be about LGBTQIA+ community, it contradicts with the 16 days of activism against GBV. This march happens every year in a particular month. It also contradicts with

the word “gender” because it says GBV against women and children. This point is elucidated by Participant C₃ as follows:

I think gender-based violence is any violence that occurs because, to that specific, the victim was targeted because of their gender or because of their sexual orientation. So, uh, I think when they say gender-based violence against women, I then struggle with what you mean of anyone can be a woman. Then it is almost like a global pandemic. Then it is like saying the same thing to us (Participant C₃).

This implies that there is an ambiguity between the march and its purpose where only women and children are considered to be violated based on gender. This seems not to be the case when it comes to violence that is committed against men. Participant C₂ explicates this contradiction as follows:

I'm not sure if the artist is aware that she's contradicting herself in the sense that in some paragraphs, it's just GBV, and then it's specific to say that it's GBV against women and children. So, in the cases where you see using, for example, the issue of the X, it means, as Participant C₃ said, GBV is violence that is committed against a gender, whether you're a man or woman, against a gender balance. And then there are some sentences. I think there's a bit of contradiction there (Participant C₂).

The march is about the 16 days of activism against GBV but the usage of the South African rainbow flag and the letter “x” in the word “womxn” sold it out to the illogicality. Also, the issue of labelling GBV against women and children creates a problem because gender violence is committed against both male and female people. Participant C₄ states:

But it's also a paradox because if gender-based violence is mostly about men abusing women, being gay doesn't remove the fact that I'm still a man and I could abuse a female. So, I think that's something that we tend to overlook as well (Participant C₄).

This implies that in the combat for GBV against women and children, not only straight men can be perpetrators but also gays since they are also men. Participant C₄ observes the presence of the two flags, that is the South African flag and the LGBTQIA+ community flag. Participant C₄ also perceives that on the South African

flag, there is red paint dripping from it. Participant C₄ said about the South African flag dripping with blood:

The flag, South African flag with like red paint dripping. Uhm it reminds me of a quote by Francis, 'a nation built on blood must be rebuilt on blood and the reason why he said that. Is because a lot of African countries that have problems with violence of any form whether it is gender based violence or uprisings it is because for that country to get to that point was when they colonized them, it was as a result of violence. But the march also symbolised how routine it is that every month, every year in a particular month, people will take it seriously and then the next year it happens and again and again (Participant C₄).

After the participants were shown Carin Bester's performance explanation, they had a robust discussion about the use of language and symbolism in the context of gender-based violence. Participant C₅ raised the issue of the evolving language of gender identity and the use of the 'x' in place of the traditional 'a' in the word "woman". He expressed concern about the potential confusion and lack of clarity in defining the term "woman", which he believes could contribute to gender-based violence. This sparked a debate about the definition of gender-based violence, with Participant C₃ emphasising that it is violence targeted at an individual because of their gender or sexual orientation.

Participant C₂ echoed Participant C₅'s thoughts, pointing out the apparent contradiction in the artist's portrayal of gender-based violence. She noted that while some instances were specific to GBV against women and children, in other cases, it was described more broadly as gender-based violence. This inconsistency led to a discussion about the symbolic representation of gender, with Participant C₂ questioning the meaning of the 'x' and its sensitivity. She suggested that the use of 'x' symbolises the absence of men in the word, highlighting the focus on women in the context of gender-based violence.

The group also touched on the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, emphasising its specific focus on women and children. This sparked further debate about the artist's messaging and the potential contradictions within their work. Participant C₁ questioned the symbolism of the 'x', prompting a reflection on the absence of men in the representation of gender-based violence.

The discussion highlighted the complex and evolving nature of language and symbolism in the context of gender-based violence. The participants grappled with the implications of using the 'x' in the word "woman" and how it might impact the understanding and definition of gender. They also raised important questions about the specificity of gender-based violence against women and the potential implications of broader messaging. The dialogue shed light on the need for clear and inclusive language and symbolism in addressing gender-based violence and promoting gender equality.

4.3.12 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Carin Bester

This section of the study seeks to blend the collective reaction from the three groups on the interpretations of Carin Bester's artwork. In interpreting the performances, the three cohorts were in harmony in viewing it as the representation of the campaign against GBV on women and children with the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community but excluding men.

(i) Symbols

- **Colours**

The participants in the three groups observed the red colour as symbolising bloodshed and depicting death. They also interpret blood as the representation of visibility, as purity, and as the embodiment of a ghost.

- **South African National anthem and the flag**

All three groups observed the usage of South African National anthem and the flag and stated that the intention of the artist was to make South Africans see the purpose of the performance.

- **Womxn**

The use of the word womxn in Carin Bester's performance was noticed by Group B and C's participants and interpreted the "x" in the word "womxn" as a sign of intersectional feminism and that it represents both genders.

- **365 days**

The use of the “365 days” in Carin Bester’s performance was said to stress the importance of activism to end gender violence (GBV) as opposed to only 16 days which is observed worldwide from 25 November to 10 December yearly. Therefore, according to Group B, Carin Bester’s performance, where she used 365, was to emphasise the importance of the GBV activism campaigns.

- ***Faces of the dead victims***

The participants observed the faces of the dead victims of GBV at the end of the video as one of the symbols that Carin Bester used in her performance and agreed that they represent publicity and remind the public about the reality that these were actual people who were killed as a result of GBV and left their families and loved ones bereaved.

4.4 FOCUS GROUPS’ RESPONSES TO THE THREE SCULPTURES

Two sculptures that utilise dress code and accessories were selected from Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare and Nandipha Mntabo to be analysed and interpreted by the three focus groups, first to discover whether clothing (dresses, garments, costumes) and accessories carry significantly different or similar messages and meanings when they are used in art. Secondly, to confirm whether the cultural backgrounds of the viewers play a role in viewers’ perspectives regarding their interpretation of the artworks. The same groups that participated in interpreting the performances by Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe and Carin Bester interpreted the selected sculptures.

4.4.1 Group A’s Interpretation of Mary Sibande’s Sculptures

Mary Sibande’s artworks entitled “They Don’t Make Them Like They Used To” 2008 and one each from the “A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern” Series 2013 were selected, as can be seen in Figures 4.12 and 4.14, respectively.



Figure 4.12: Mary Sibande, “They Don’t Make Them Like They Used To”, 2008

4.4.1.1 “They Don’t Make Them Like They Used To”

Only Participant A₃ provided a response by identifying the Superman image on the jersey that is being knitted by Sophie, relating it to the fact that domestic workers are considered superwomen. After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation, they all agreed with the artist's interpretations and did not add any comments.

Mary Sibande developed the character of Sophie in series of life-size sculptures and photographic prints. According to Sibande, they are a collection of fantasies and imagined narratives, developed from her personal history. Her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother were all maids (domestic workers). Sibande was the first woman in her family allowed to study and she wanted to celebrate this.

Sibande uses the human figure as a vehicle for exploring identity in context of a post-colonial South Africa. In the process she also comments on the stereotypical depictions of especially black women in South Africa. The figures used in sculptures are casted from the artist's own body in fiberglass and silicone, the same material used for shop window mannequins. Sophie's Victorian dress costumes are handmade mainly from the blue fabric typical of domestic workers' uniforms and workmen's overalls in South Africa.

Her sculptures and photographic work depict domestic work and are not intended to create feelings of shame, anger or humiliation in the viewer but rather to transcend this reality where the domestic worker is able to liberate herself. The implication is that we can all be freed from the past. This is particularly significant for the victims, perpetrators and beneficiaries of Apartheid.

Figure 4.13: Mary Sibande, Explanation of "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To",

4.4.1.2 *A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series*

Participant A₂ expressed a sentiment of resilience and strength with the statement, "We never die; we multiply". On the other hand, Participant A₁ offers an insightful analysis of the artwork, linking the use of purple and white colours with royalty. The interpretation suggests that the artwork portrays black women as royal figures challenging the conventional stereotypes and celebrating their beauty and grace. The mention of the figure appearing comfortable and ready to dance further emphasises a sense of confidence and self-assuredness.

After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation of "A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern", Participant A₁ expressed appreciation for the intelligent use of language and powerful symbolism in the phrase "the purple shall govern". Participant A₁ also connected this to historic events, where the colour of the

skin was used to divide and discriminate people and found the piece to have strong meaning and connected to the idea of empowerment and political leadership.

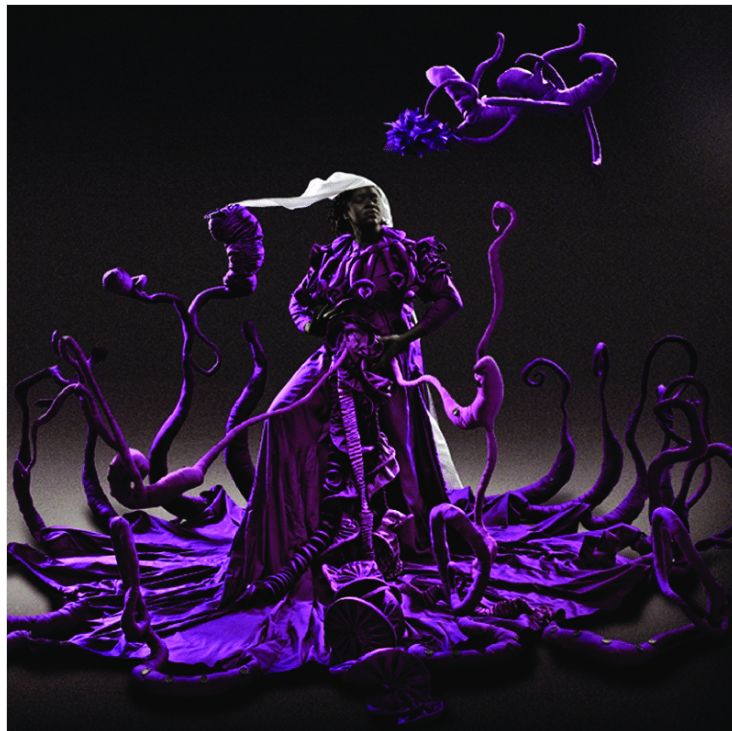


Figure 4.14: Mary Sibande, A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series (2013).

Sibande's latest artworks are an offshoot from her earlier sculptures of Sophie Ntombikayise. Mary Sibande employs the human form as a vehicle through painting, photography and sculpture to explore the construction of identity, particularly black women's identity, in postcolonial South Africa.

Sibande draws inspiration from a specific event in the late 1980s, in which the South African police sprayed protestors with a water cannon laced with purple dye to enable to identify and arrest anti-apartheid activists. This act motivated Mary's interest in the roles that colour played in the history of this country. Colour remains a predominant factor in our social interactions, and it continues to play a dominant role in our perceptions of one another as South Africans. In Sibande's view, colour is like a monster with which we are all too familiar. On a personal level, this new work comes full circle as Sibande connects it back to her very first exhibition, where she displayed a figure – that represented her – in purple attire.

Figure 4.15: Mary Sibande, Explanation of "A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern"

In summary, the group responses highlight a theme of empowerment, pride, and celebration of black identity in the artwork, as interpreted by the participants.

4.4.2 Group B's interpretation of Mary Sibande's artworks

4.4.2.1 "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To"

Participant B₃ emphasised the idea of black women as superwomen, while Participant B₂ highlighted their role in creating and nurturing successful individuals. The participants also recognise the domestic work of black women, with Participant B₂ noting that successful people often come from domestic workers' parental backgrounds. Additionally, Participant B₁ emphasised that black women have more within them than just their domestic side. The participants' views also shed light on the often-overlooked contributions of black women to the success and well-being of others.

After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation, all Participants in Group B agreed with the artist's explanation.

4.4.2.2 "A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series"

Participant B₃ expressed the idea of immortality and endless proliferation with the statement, "We never die. We multiply". Participant B₄ referenced the mythological creature Medusa. Participant B₁ mentioned the concept of multitasking. Finally, Participant B₂ discussed the ability to multitask and made a humorous reference to Medusa as well.

After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation, participant B₂ discussed the idea of "terrible beauty" and made a connection to the myth of Medusa, who was originally a beautiful woman before being turned into a monster with hair made of snakes. Furthermore, Participant B₂ points out the imagery of spirals on a dress as a reference to the snakes in Medusa's hair.

4.4.3 Group C interpretation of Mary Sibande's artworks

4.4.3.1 They Don't Make Them Like They Used To

Participant C₁ identifies the act of knitting as a form of creativity and dedication to her family. Participant C₂ highlights the dual role of the domestic worker as heroin in both

her own family and the family she serves. The artist is also connected to the work when the name "Mary" is noted as a common name for domestic workers, emphasising the widespread nature of this role. The subdued expression on Participant C₂'s face is interpreted as a symbol of humility and the weight of responsibilities she carries for both families.

After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation, all Participants in Group C agreed with the artist's interpretation, and they did not add any comments.

4.4.3.2 *A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series*

Participant C₂ compared the idea to an octopus, suggesting that being able to do a lot of things can sometimes mean not being a master of anything, referencing the saying, "to be a jack of all trades and a master of none". Participant C₃ adds to the metaphor by suggesting that each tentacle of the octopus represents a line of the family that the individual is helping and contributing to grow.

After the researcher presented the participants with Mary Sibande's explanation, Participant C₂ discussed the significance of the colour in the artwork, noting that it is more personal to the artist. Additionally, Participant C₁ sees a specific element in the artwork, speculating that it could represent the deceased grandmother looking out for the subject in the artwork.

4.4.4 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Sibandes's two artworks

The three cohorts were in harmony in viewing the artwork, *They Don't Make Them Like They Used To,* as elevating the black women who are working as domestic workers as superwomen who can multitask. This is based on the red supermen image on the jersey that is knitted by Sophie, and the purple colour in the *"A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series"*, being a representation of domestic workers as Royalty.

(i) Symbols

- **Superman**

Superman's symbol is known in cartoons and films as a character having great strength, the ability to fly, and other extraordinary powers. Hence, the multitasking of domestic workers is associated with the character of superwoman.

- **Purple colour**

The purple colour was observed as representing royalty and wealth based on the prior knowledge of the respondents.

- **Octopus-like creature**

The octopus-like creature was interpreted as the representation of beauty and multitasking and spirituality, intelligence and skill.

- **Spiral things around the neck**

The participants, in their entirety, observed the spiral things around the neck as the mimicry of Medusa.

4.4.5 Group A's interpretation of Yinka Shonibare's artworks

The works entitled "Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms" 2019 and Leisure Lady (with ocelots) 2001 were selected from Yinka Shonibare to be interpreted by the three focus groups, Figures 4.16 and 4.18, respectively.



Figure 4.16: Yinka Shonibare, "Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms" (2019), unique fibreglass sculpture, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, bespoke hand-colored globe, steel, brass, wood, resin, and silk, 244 x 193 x 436 cm

4.4.5.1 Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms

None of the participants in Group A responded to the artwork until they were shown and read the artist's interpretation.

After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, Participant A₃ said the female holding a gun represents power and gender, adding that the artwork could be interpreted as women holding power because the gun symbolises power. Participant A₃ further elaborated on her interpretation, suggesting that the artwork could be seen as a representation of women holding power over others and humorously remarked about the potential readiness for a female president in South Africa, sparking laughter from the group.

Through life-sized sculptures, artist Yinka Shonibare CBE considers the grasp of colonialism and its lasting effects on modern conceptions of identity. Each faceless figure is in the midst of an action, presented shooting a mass of cherry blossoms from a rifle, lumbering forward with a hefty mesh sack, or balancing a towering stack of cakes. Evocatively posed, the figures are topped with globes and astronaut helmets, which simultaneously gesture toward movement in the form of travel and exploration while obscuring individual identities.

Known for using patterned textiles across mediums, the British-Nigerian artist outfits his surreal sculptures with Batik fabrics, which have a history rooted in colonialism. Originally practised in Southeast Asia, the wax-dyeing method was adopted by the Dutch, who commercially produced the patterned textiles and sold them to West African colonies. Since the 1960s, the vibrant fabric has come to signal African independence and identity. To dive deeper into Shonibare's artworks that explore identity, colonialism, and globalisation, head to [Artsy](#) and [Instagram](#).

Figure 4.17: Yinka Shonibare's Explanation of "Leisure Lady (with ocelots)"

4.4.5.2 Leisure Lady (with ocelots)

Participant A₁ expressed the idea that the artwork of the cats represents power and strength and associates the cats with a royal calibre or a leopard-like appearance, emphasising the strength of women to handle even the wildest creatures.

Furthermore, Participant A₁ sees it as a statement on African femininity, particularly noting the use of textiles in the artwork and expressed her admiration for the artwork and identifies herself as a fan. Additionally, Participant A₁ mentions the concept of independence in relation to the artwork.

Yinka Shonibare's life-size headless mannequins wear the attire of the most sophisticated Victorian style, paradoxically made of Adire, a very detailed, colourful African cloth based on a tie-dyeing technique. Always active participants in everyday life that the artist most of the time borrows from art history, Shonibare's characters reveal the agonizing condition of human beings caught between two cultures. His work breathes a bipolar nature where the relationship between colony and metropolis, white and black, poor and rich, traditional and contemporary society modulates a new cultural individual.

Figure 4.18: Yinka Shonibare's Explanation of *Leisure Lady (with ocelots)*

After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, participants in Group A disagreed with the artist's explanation. Participant A₁ deliberates on the contrasting nature of African and European cultures, specifically in relation to the representation of the dress and the use of African prints on a Victorian-style dress.



Figure 4.19: Yinka Shonibare, "Leisure Lady (with ocelots)", 2001, Life-size fiberglass mannequin, three fiberglass ocelots, Dutch wax printed cotton, leather, glass, Dimensions variable, woman 63 x 31½ x 31½ in., ocelots each 15¾ x 23½ x 7⅞ in.,

Participant A₁ further emphasises the lack of portrayal of contrast and questions the need for it. Participant A₁ adds to the discussion by pointing out the interpretation of animals representing Africa and being in chains, suggesting that this symbolises the continued influence and control of Victorian/European power over African cultures despite gaining independence.

4.4.6 Group B's interpretation of Yinka Shonibare artworks

4.4.6.1 Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms

Participant B₅ noted that the hand gesture of the woman in the artwork shows her stand-alone. Participant B₄ suggested that the woman might be reaching out for somebody with her hand gesture. There was agreement among the participants that the ring on the woman's left hand signifies a need for someone or a desire for a partner. Participant B₂ interpreted the artwork as a representation of a strong and independent woman who may also have a need for a partner. There was also a discussion about the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in African society, with the hand gesture potentially symbolising this transition (Participant B₂). Additionally, according to Participant B₂ the artwork can also be seen as a representation of African femininity, with the woman's ability to handle the tigers on her own symbolising strength and independence. The participants interpreted the artwork as a portrayal of a strong and independent African woman.

After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, Group B disagreed with the artist's explanation. The contrast of rich and Poor illustration is highlighted by Participant B₂, who mentions that rich people are the ones who are always depicted with wild pets; Participant B₃ further elaborates on this contrast by suggesting that the hand with the leopards represents the rich, while the empty hand represents the poor. Participant B₃ also suggests a lack of empathy and generosity among the rich, particularly referencing Europeans, who are portrayed as unwilling to share their resources.

4.4.6.2 Leisure Lady (with ocelots)

Similar to *Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms*, they again mentioned the portrayal of a strong and independent African woman. After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, similar to Group A, all Participants in Group B disagreed with the artist's interpretations, repeating the same thoughts as group A.

4.4.7 Group C's interpretation of Yinka Shonibare artworks

4.4.7.1 Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms

Participant C₅ expressed a feeling of responsibility for the destruction of nature, likening it to shooting down the environment with a gun. This view contrasts with Participant C₃, who saw the tree emerging from the gun as a representation of the world taking resources through violence.

Participant C₁ offered a unique perspective, noting the African attire on the figure and connecting it to the idea of resources coming from Africa. They also questioned the significance of the gender of the figure, highlighting the societal norms associated with femininity and masculinity. The discussion around the gender of the figure continued, with Participant C₁ acknowledging the traditional association of women with dresses and heels, while Participant C₅ remarked on the masculine nature of the gun. However, Participant C₁ challenged these gender associations and noted the increasing presence of women in traditionally male-dominated roles.

After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, C₂ expressed interest in delving deeper into Shonibare's work by exploring his artworks that explore these themes and suggested visiting Artsy and Instagram for more information. Participant C₅ raised a question about the colonial figure in Shonibare's work, speculating whether it could be the queen. Participant C₂ responded that it could be an interesting interpretation. Participant C₄ contributed to the discussion by discussing the expansion of the human race through colonialism, emphasising the violence and exploitation used by the British and Dutch to expand their DNA through children born to African women.

4.4.7.2 Leisure Lady (with ocelots)

Participant C₄ pointed out the distinction between the rich and poor in their ability to acquire and control such animals. Participant C₂ emphasised the power and fearlessness exhibited by the woman in taming the animals. Participant C₁ discussed the geographical and cultural identity of Egypt and its perceived belonging to both the Middle East and Africa. Additionally, Participants C₄ and C₅ respectively, joked about gender roles and power dynamics in relation to the woman and the wild animals.

Participant C₃ offered insights into the colonial perspective, noting the symbolism of the colonisers' attempt to control and domesticate African wildlife, reflecting the ignorance and consequences of their actions. Finally, Participant C₁ noted the positioning of the animals and the hand gestures of the figure, suggesting a deliberate and public display of the message conveyed by the image.

After the researcher presented the participants with Yinka Shonibare's explanation, Participant C₂ mentioned that having wealth allows for the ability to indulge in any form of entertainment. Participant C₁ referred to a contradiction regarding the relationship between "the whole Egypt thing" and Africa.

4.4.8 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Yinka Shonibare

Group A participants were lost in interpreting Shonibare's artworks and could only attempt after they were shown the artist's explanation, however, groups B and C made a good attempt and identified and interpreted the following symbols:

(i) Symbols

• **Gunperson**

The female gunperson was interpreted as a symbol of an Apartheid policeman and as a female who is venturing into the men's world or a representation of a country.

• **Gun**

The gun was identified as a symbol for the colonial period, that depicts violence. The branch with flowers is a symbol for black people.

• **Cherry blossoms**

The cherry blossoms are a symbol of democracy and depict resources.

- **Victorian dress**

Victorian dress is a symbol of colonisation because it was during Queen Vitoria's rule when the British Colonial policy was developed.

- **Globe**

The globe is the symbol of a head.

- **African attire**

The African attire is the symbol of the body.

- **Leopard-like cats**

The leopard-like cats were identified as symbols of royalty and pride that depict African culture and neo-colonisation, as well as wealth.

- **Hand gestures**

Hand gestures were interpreted as a symbol of independence, and an empty hand as a symbol of poverty or emptiness.

- **Holding tigers with one hand**

The holding of tigers was interpreted as a symbol of strength and independence, greediness and colonisation.

- **Silhouette dress in African print**

The silhouette dress in African print was identified as the symbol of European culture in Africa.

4.4.9 Nandipha Mntambo

Two artworks entitled "Enchantment", 2012 and "Inkunzi Emnyama, 2009 were selected from Nandipha Mntambo to be interpreted by the three focus groups, Figures 4.20 and 4.22, respectively.

4.4.9.1 Group A's Interpretation of the Enchantment

Participant A₁ responded and expressed an observation about the cowhide, noting that its shape gives the impression of a man standing and makes a connection between the hide and the idea of "man as a beast" and mentioned uncertainty about the tails on the floor in relation to the man's figure.



Figure 4.20: Nandipha Mntambo, Enchantment, Courtesy of the artist, and Stevenson | Johannesburg & Cape Town (2012)

Her work consists of a human mould (single or multiple) dressed with cowhide in an aerobic composition. The mould is so realistic and underlines a black feminist agenda or notions of 'Africanicity' that her bovine-like characters, installations and paraphernalia speak of a pastoral, traditional or cultural heritage such as lobola (dowry) need only seek further into her work to discover otherwise.

Mntambo's art subverts cultural signifiers like the cowhide to create work that pushes boundaries with a distinct look and feel, all the while challenging how the material is used, interpreted and understood. The artist herself, however, best describes the aesthetic influences.

Her work addresses ongoing debates around traditional gender roles, body politics, and identity. She works in photography, sculpture, video, and mixed media to explore the liminal boundaries between human and animal, femininity and masculinity, attraction and repulsion, and life and death. Mntambo is best known for her figurative cowhide sculptures, which allude to the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

Figure 4.21: Nandipha Mntambo's Explanation of "Enchantment"

After the researcher presented the participants with Nandipha Mntambo's explanation, Participant A₁ found that there was a little gap that confused the group regarding the standing dress and suggested that it would have been easier to see that this is the base of the dress. Furthermore, participant A₁ clarified by saying "man" was referring

to mankind and not specifically to a male individual. Participant A₁ emphasised by saying "man is a beast" and not "a man is a beast", highlighting the difference in her statement.

4.4.9.2 Inkunzi Emnyama

None of the participants in Group A responded to the artwork until they were shown and read the artist's interpretation.



Figure 4.22: Nandipha Mngambo, Inkunzi Emnyama, 2009, which the work revolves to become this artwork PRACA DE TOUROS III

Inkunzi Emnyama were shot in a deserted bullfighting arena in Mozambique, which was a Portuguese colony. The once-impressive concrete structure is now dilapidated, and grandstands are devoid of noise and excitement. In these works, the bullfighter, or matador, meditatively enters what Mntambo calls a solemn ritual of dressing before the fight. The matador's uniform – traje de luces, or suit of lights – is usually worn by men, for very few female bullfighters exist worldwide. Mntambo, however, merges male and female qualities in these and other works.

Loneliness is exposed despite the flashy exhibitionism of this flamboyant sport, and rather than keeping a distance between actor and audience, Mntambo merges actor, acted-upon and observer in an extraordinary way. It is the private moment of fear, experienced by both the bull and the bullfighter, that Mntambo draws from.

Figure 4.23: Nandipha Mntambo's Explanation on "Inkunzi Emnyama", 2009

Participant A₁ expressed a feeling that the first and second dresses designed by the artist are very different from each other and do not convey the same message and questioned whether the two dresses are the exact same design or if they have different elements that make them appear different. Participant A₁ further suggested that the two dresses by the artist may not argue for the same thing or convey the same message. Hence participant A₁ acknowledged the possibility of being wrong in her interpretation of the dresses by Nandipha. Participant B₃ also added a comment in isiXhosa, stating "Le ayinxibileyo," which translates to "the one that Nandipha is wearing".

4.4.10 Group B's interpretation of Nandipha Mntambo's artworks

4.4.10.1 Enchantment

Participant B₃ expressed surprise or disbelief with the exclamation "Shoo!" while Participant B₄ inquired about the presence of hair and an unidentified object on the floor. Participant B₂ is questioning the number of cows that were killed to get the tails while estimating that one or two cow hides could have been used to create the standing figure. Moreover, participants B₃ and B₄ discuss the association of cows with wealth and power, highlighting the symbolism and cultural significance of cows. Hence, participant B₃ is of the view that an ox or cow represents power. Participant B₃ further refers to the symbol of an ox as the figure that is created with cowhide. According to Participant B₃, the figure, as a male, "could be associated with having strong abilities that resemble those of an ox. Participant B₃ is not sure about the tails on the floor. Participant B₄ views an ox as the representation of wealth because of its high price.

After the researcher presented the participants with Nandipha Mntambo explanation, Participant B₄ expressed confusion regarding the term "tails" and requested clarification. Just a few seconds later, after an explanation had been provided by other participants Participant B₄ had a realisation and stated, "Oh! I get it, it's the tails of the dress". Participant B₂ responded with laughter and confirmed, "Oh! Ok, the tail of the dress."

4.4.10.2 Inkunzi Emnyama

None of the participants from Group B responded to the artwork until they were shown and read the artist's explanation.

After the researcher presented the participants with Nandipha Mntambo's explanation, Participant B₃ mentioned a festival in Spain that involves a red cross and bulls running out but did not recall the name of the festival.

4.4.11 Group C's interpretation of Nandipha Mntambo's artworks

4.4.11.1 Enchantment

Participant C₂ identified the cowhide and said cows in African cultures represent ancestry and wealth. Participant C₅ stated that the cowhide is real and can be worn without harming one's skin. Participant C₂ asserts that the figure created with the cowhide represents Nandipha Mntambo's mother, from whom she draws inspiration. Therefore, since both the cow and the figure represent strength, then Nandipha Mntambo's mother is her source and pillar of strength. Participant C₂ views the tails on the floor as hair loss, representing that "the person had to fight and lose their skin" to be where she is.

The beneficial products from a cow, as pinpointed by Participant C₃ extracted from an African poem, are:

The milk of a cow is the milk that raises a baby. The skin that keeps you warm, the meat that you can actually live on and then you use it in farming in terms of the plough and everything (Participant C₃).

Participant C₃ views the cow as the mother who plays an important role in every part of the child's life and growth. Her valuable functions include nurturing; hence Participant C₃ suggested that it should be valued more.

After the researcher presented the participants with Nandipha Mntambo's explanation, Participant C₂ expressed surprise at the unexpected explanation of Nandipha Mntambo, particularly the meaning behind the use of cowhide. Participant C₁ questions the significance of Participant C₂'s interest in chemical processes.

Participant C₅ highlighted the realistic appearance of the cowhide and its potential for wearing it without harm to the skin.

Discussion also centred on the connection between the cowhide and African identity, with participants considering Participant C₂'s references to her mother and femininity. Participant C₂ emphasised the moulding of the cowhide and its representation of femininity, while Participant C₁ challenged the idea of physical representation and emphasised the internal aspects of womanhood. Strength is also mentioned as a significant aspect of what women represent.

4.4.11.2 Inkunzi Emnyama

Participant C₃ believes that the red cloth that Nandipha Mntambo holds, is used to aggravate the bull and that Nandipha Mntambo wore the skin of a bull. Participant C₄ stated that this may mean that Nandipha Mntambo is both the bull and the aggravator to the extent that she (Mntambo) becomes angry the same way the bull does. By representing the aggravator, Nandipha Mntambo is creating a culture shock because, traditionally, this act is usually performed by males.

After the researcher presented the participants with Nandipha Mntambo's explanation, all Participants in Group C said nothing after reading the artist's interpretation.

4.4.12 Amalgamation of Groups A to C's interpretations of Nandipha Mntambo

Interestingly, in interpreting the artworks/performances, the three cohorts were in harmony to view it as representing the woman's strength and value.

(i) Symbols

- **Cow**

A cow is a symbol of power that depicts wealth and a mother.

- **Cows hide**

The cowhide is identified as the representation of a man as a beast and a bull.

- **Ox or Cow's Tails**

The tails are identified as representing lost hair, which symbolises that one had to fight and lose their skin to succeed.

- **Red cloth**

The red cloth was said to represent a bullfighting event.

4.5 KEY INFORMANTS FROM THE THREE FOCUS GROUPS

From the focus groups, four key informants, participants A1, B3, B4 and C3, were chosen to elaborate and expand on their interpretations individually with the purpose of providing critical and in-depth meanings from having participated in the focus group sessions and being informed of the artist's intended message. The extended data was interpreted to make apparent the significance of clothing in conveying new norms and habits, especially when they are used as objects of expressive art.

4.5.1 Extended A₁'s interpretation of the six artists' artworks

Participant A₁ is of the opinion that Cohen elicits "cultural shock" due to cultural differences of the chosen community, and although Cohen's performances are known for pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms, it is clear that this can be disconcerting to some viewers. Due to these cultural differences, his specific messages are sometimes lost in translation due to clashes with the culture of his audience. Steven Cohen's work highlights the discomfort and dissonance that can arise when art challenges the status quo. It also underscores the potential for art to bridge cultural divides and provoke meaningful discussions about important social issues. Whether or not viewers agree with Cohen's artistic choices, his work has certainly succeeded in sparking dialogue and introspection.

Participant A₁ interpreted Mgibe's performance as that usually, when you see someone with a bandage, you know you need to exercise caution and care and position yourself from a place of kindness. Furthermore, *Participant A₁*'s interpretation of the performance is that it forces one to re-evaluate one's thoughts, behaviour and the world we may want to create.

Participant A₁'s interpretation of Bester brings to light the ongoing and repetitive reality of femicide and GBV in South Africa. "She had a name" carries the weight of acknowledging every murdered woman as a person, forcing society to look past the numbers we see on the statistical crime sheets and realise that each number was a person and that they had names and identities.

In Sibande's "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To", 2008 *Participant A₁* added that the blue colour symbolises integrity and the material used on the lady knitting showcases how women of colour are seen as the superheroes of society and shine light on the importance of their role on the communities and the sacrifices they make. In "A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series", *Participant A₁* adds that the colour purple is often associated with royalty, and the dress code can be imagined in the late Victorian Era, which can be illustrated from the material used and the style of the garment.

In Shonibare's "Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms", Participant A₁ drew attention to the significance of the dress style depicted in the artwork, noting that Cherry blossoms usually represent love, purity and dominance. The old gun symbolises colonialism and how it shattered the cherry blossoms by firing the gun. *In "Leisure Lady (with ocelots)", 2001 Participant A₁* added that the artwork symbolises the extravagance and excess of the wealthy people who possess the means to indulge in frivolous and luxurious pursuits. The figure in the artwork represents the elite class, who hold both financial wealth and social status. The inclusion of ocelots, exotic and expensive wild cats, further emphasises the opulence and privilege of the subject.

In Mntambo's "Enchantment", *Participant A₁* suggested that one's sense of identity and belonging is deeply intertwined with the traditions, customs, and practices passed down through generations. *Participant A₁* further stated that the artwork encourages a sense of pride and appreciation to enrich cultural heritage, serving as a source of strength and resilience in navigating modern challenges. *In "Inkunzi Emnyama", Participant A₁* added that the female figure represents a powerful force that is unafraid to confront challenges and embrace danger and that the outfit represents modern mixed with African tradition, and the white colour signifies purity and peace.

4.5.2 Extended B₃'s interpretation of the six artists' artworks

Participant B₃, connects Cohen's Chandelier with light, but views the permeance as a rich man's version of a lamp. Therefore, it is highly decorative and expensive and sometimes loses its real meaning and purpose. The fact that the artist is parading in a squatter camp/informal settlement makes us think of how the rich focus on

themselves instead of using their money (their light) to help those in need. Therefore, it is just an over-decorated chandelier, but the rich do not fulfil the original purpose of bringing the needed light.

In Mgibe's performance, *Participant B₃* added that the person's head is a cloud – either a dust cloud or a storm and that if it is a dust cloud, it can be an analogy for the “rubbish” people put in their heads like propaganda, physical appearances, gossiping and the like.

In Bester's performance, *Participant B₃* emphasises the need for continued advocacy and action to combat GBV in South Africa and beyond and that the artwork compels viewers to reconsider their roles in supporting this call for meaningful change. Women fear for their lives as they are prisoners in their own lives while the perpetrators walk free.

In Sibande's "Sophie, “They Don't Make Them Like They Used To”, *Participant B₃* added that the artwork revolves around the dual representation of the domestic worker as both a superhero and a creator of superheroes in her own right, symbolising the strength and resilience required to fulfil her responsibilities and support her family.

In “A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series”, *Participant B₃* noted the way the dress appears to be waving around, almost as if it has a life of its own. The movement of the octopus squid's purple-ish ink protects it against its predators. It can be seen as governments and authorities actually feeling weak and trying to protect themselves against those who are actually vulnerable and trying to defend their rights.

In Shonibare's “Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms” (2019), *Participant B₃* stated that the woman who is firing a rifle makes us think of gender roles and how rifles are associated mainly with males. It also makes us think of how women might have to become more aggressive in their fight for equality. In “Leisure Lady (with ocelots)”, she said it also reminds us of how animals from Africa were taken by colonialists because the colonisers believed they had so much power and wanted to take everything good from Africa and control the African continent.

In Mntambo's Enchantment, *Participant B₃* acknowledged the value of oxen and cows in African Culture. *B₃* further noted that the cowhide is designed in the shape of a woman, which could also highlight the value of women as mothers who deserve to be respected. In "Inkunzi Emnyama", *Participant B₃* interpreted the red flag as aggravating the bull, and the artist is wearing the skin of the bull, maybe portraying that she is both the aggravator and the angry one.

4.5.3 Extended *B₄*'s interpretation of the six artists' artworks

Participant B₄ interpret Steven Cohen's makeup on his head in the shape of clouds, which can be seen as displaying a man whose "head is in the clouds", and he is not aware of what is happening around him. Furthermore, this performance shows a man dressed in what can be described as representing extreme luxury, walking in the streets of a community that is extremely poor.

In Wezile's performance, *Participant B₄* interpreted it as someone who has been killed, looking down at the figure drawn with white chalk, suggesting where a dead body lay. The performance shows blood, books and what seems to be indications of the legal system, and the 'walking corpse' bowing to it, perhaps showing how the system failed them. White can be seen as showing the innocence of the victim.

In Bester's performance, *Participant B₄* emphasised the very diverse group of women marching alone with no men's support.

In Sibande's "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To", *Participant B₄* interpreted the artwork as she is 'creating' a superhero. As she is stitching the Superman emblem onto the cloth, it may show that she is capable of bringing up a superhero. In Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series," the dress itself seems to be waving around, as if there are arms to it, perhaps indicating how much she is able to do on her own.

Participant B₄ only added information on "Leisure Lady (with ocelots)", identifying cats as a symbol of power, stressing that the lady is holding them with one hand, exhibiting the power she has. Her other hand is stretched out, perhaps indicating that she is alone and able to possess this power and authority on her own.

In Enchantment, *Participant B₄* added that the artwork explores the relationship between humans and animals, portraying cowhides as superior and those who wear them being associated with luxury, high social class, and status, which speaks volumes about the intersection of culture and societal norms.

In Inkuzi emnyama *Participant B₄* stated that the woman waving a red flag was using it to capture the bull, evoking a sense of power and control. The act of capturing or taming a bull is a display of strength and dominance. This could suggest that the woman in the image is asserting her authority or taking control of a situation.

4.5.4 Extended C₃'s interpretation of the six artists' artworks

In Cohen's performance, *Participant C₃* sees it as evoking cultural shock to the surrounding community. The artist may want to convey a particular message to the crowd, but it is problematic as it clashes with the culture of his audience. They see a naked man wearing an unconventional outfit, thus the message gets lost in translation.

On Mgibe's performance, *Participant C₃* added that it represents the death of the self in the union of marriage, the self-destructive nature of a materialistic society and the problem of decadence in the contemporary world—renewal or rebirth like a caterpillar evolving into a butterfly.

In Bester's performance, *Participant C₃* stated that it serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for societal change in the bloodshed of women and unity in the fight against violence.

In Sibande's "They Don't Make Them Like They Used To", *Participant C₃* expressed that it serves as a call to acknowledge domestic workers as the superheroes within the community. In "Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern series", *Participant C₃* described the octopus's figure as representing a woman with fingers in many pots, and she expands her talents, business, or ideas and that she is no ordinary person.

In "Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms", *Participant C₃* described the image as Colonial expansion, through white men having kids with slaves and giving birth to a new race. Britain's colonial impact is seen in the dress style of contemporary Africans,

highlighting the disconnect between the reality of the situation in the colonies and the perception of peace and normalcy maintained by those in the colonisers' home countries. *Leisure Lady* (with ocelots) is described as having a multi-faceted perspective on money, power, and status that wealthy people have. It depicts money and power to spend on frivolous things and that they use their position to terrorise those with lesser power.

In Mntambo's *Enchantment*, *Participant C₃* described the artwork as a portrayal of the presence of the ancestors and renewal of self, which is represented by the fur on the floor rooted in ancestry, culture and tradition. In "*Inkunzi Emnyama*", *Participant C₃* describes it as a woman doing roles traditionally associated with men showing that times are changing and that women are fearless and are embracing dangerous challenges.

CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

This study's argument is based on the premise that clothes are interpreted differently when used in everyday circumstances than in artistic enhancement or expression. This is due to clothes being coded with culturally constructed meanings as well as the audience's prior or cultural knowledge. The study makes the argument that performance clothing/costumes and accessories, in this context, can be viewed as creative elements that draw from and manipulate existing cultural predisposition as a mechanism for expression and intended impact. It also highlights the importance of clothing as a means for cultural construction and interpretation, which sometimes leads to controversial judgments in creative expression. Three performance artists were selected to be the main informants of this study and were asked to independently choose a significant performance from their practices in which they used clothing/costumes in a social commentary piece (see Appendices B and C). The chosen performances became the subject matter of this study, and the artists' responses were presented as the main data that was interrogated.

This study sought to highlight the importance of costumes/clothing first as a means of cultural expression and then as valuable tools for social commentary art. Its overarching aim was to discern whether culturally conceived perceptions about the meaning and interpretation of a costume affect the message a performance artist is conveying. Its main objective was to answer the question of whether the performance can convey the same message in social commentary art without the performer's chosen costume. In this, the costume becomes a vital element of the actualisation of the artwork. The study sought to discover the impact of the performance costumes as elements of cultural expression as well as to determine whether clothing conveys similar messages and meaning when used in artistic performances and in social and cultural environments. The extent to which clothing influences viewers' perceptions about the performance/artwork was investigated through focus group interviews.

This chapter draws meaning from the findings presented through various data collection methods presented in chapter four. The interpretation of these findings is framed by the Sublime Theory of infinity and Nicholas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of relational aesthetics and is explained using both denotative and connotative

approaches. According to Saifuddin (2018: 96), “denotative is a meaning that does not contain other meanings or values, whereas connotative meaning is the additional meaning or sense value contained in a word”. Connotative interpretation refers to the associating of what is presented to a priori or prior knowledge. This is evoked by emotional feelings that what is presented invokes from the beholder. In the case of the data being interpreted in this section, denotative interpretation refers to the mundane symbolism in the images/performances that were presented while connotative to what was associated with them (symbols, images and performances) based on the artists' explanations and viewers' (focus groups responses in Appendix D) interpretations.

The Sublime Theory of infinity can be better explained by bringing in Lyotard's (1984 and 1987) concept of Kantian sublime, in which he states that “the postmodern artefact is a step away from this Kantian aesthetic”. According to Lyotard (1984), “modern art has a general common feature, that of bearing witness to the unrepresentable. It makes visible the unrepresentable by means of allusion. The portrayal of the unrepresentable as a missing component in the artefact is an expression of the Kantian notion of the sublime”. The data of this study suggests that a major component in an artefact/performance in social commentary art, and although necessary, is what leads to the illusion when viewers interpret the artworks. In the Romantic art period, the idea of the sublime was described as the ideal and the infinite (Cardinal 1975: 11). The infinite here refers to the multiplicity of meanings. This study suggests interrogating all such interpretations in authenticating the emergent meanings and messages.

Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics is also described as the aesthetics of sharing and inter-human exchange in which art is viewed as a collective elaboration of meaning that allows for exchange and reflection Bourriaud (1998). Thus, the chosen artworks, which were the subject of this research, were meant to capture the viewers who were also participants in deciphering meanings to fulfil this study's objectives.

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5.1 INTERPRETATION OF THE PERFORMANCE ART

The success of the interpretation of art lies in observing selected visual artworks or performances and interviewing elite informants, which hinges on the researcher's knowledgeability regarding the interviewee's life history and background (Mikecz 2012:482). The elite informants, in this study are the selected artists or performers based on their use of dress code and performative act as the medium to express various phenomena of their lived experiences, but generally making a comment on societal issues. Analysing and interpreting the meanings of findings/results are informed by the rationale of the research, focusing on three main areas which are the argument, aims and objectives.

Costello (2012:2) views the Sublime at its etymological core as something that carries the long history of the relationship between human beings and those aspects of their world that excite them, "particularly in emotions, powerful enough to evoke transcendence, shock, awe, and terror". Hence, art, exhibition or performance art can be viewed in the context of the relationship between the artist and the audience while the artist or performer is conveying the expression of emotions by addressing a particular subject or social issue. Sometimes, the challenge arises when the ability of the audience to interpret or comprehend the content of that which is being presented or performed is based on their experience, which sometimes becomes a problem to interpret. Similar challenges are also found in visual social commentary. To elicit any kind of understanding among the recipient or observers, the performative characteristic of art likewise hints at and needs to convey a measure of information from the artist or performer to the real, implied or intended audience of that work or performance. Recognition and engagement from the audience would ideally be good indicators of information transfer from artist to audience via the artwork exhibited/presented/performed. In writing about performance, Mary Gergen (2014) points out that:

Of signal importance is the power of the performance piece to evoke emotional responses in the audience or readers. The formulation of the performance piece is boundless in terms of

the effect that may be involved, from laughter to tears. For this reason, they are much more powerful, in terms of interest value, action-potentials and persuasion, than non-performative pieces, no matter how statistically sound or intellectually profound they might be (Gergen 2014: 3).

Social commentary can be seen as commentary that is conveyed by means of an exhibition, art, or performance set in a specific social environment and levelled at an audience. The social environment, or social condition, should become part of the medium through which the artwork's idea is conveyed to the audience. This is because performance art is often bound up to a specific site or setting.

The potential of many layers of meanings or interpretations embedded in an artwork may prove to be quite difficult to unpack. This may lead to audiences being taken aback or even becoming bewildered by what they witness. To those more accustomed to traditional forms of art, performance art may even seem quite non-traditional. This is true of those who would consider drawing, painting, and sculpture as the traditional (or even only) pillars of what one should consider art. In contrast to the more traditional mediums of art, performance art involves physical elements such - as exhibition, dancing or acting while frequently incorporating props, dress, make-up, jewellery, and other types of adornments. Goldberg (2004:30) makes the very interesting comment that, historically speaking, performance art has been a medium that “challenges and violates borders between disciplines and genders”, between private and public, and between everyday life and art. The conceptual narrative and the way in which it is conveyed by the performance is the foundation upon which the performance rests, so too is the way it is shared in its social context.

The foremost purpose of performance art has almost always been to challenge the conventions of traditional forms of visual art such as painting and sculpture. When these modes no longer seem to answer the artists' needs – when they seem too conservative or too enmeshed in the traditional art world and too distant from ordinary people – artists have often turned to performance to find new audiences and test new ideas (The art story 2018).

5.2 THE IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE ART ON SOCIAL COMMENTARY

The three performance artists, Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe and Carin Bester, responded to the questionnaire in Appendix B. Questions 5 and 6, as well as 12, 13 and 14, as listed below, were seeking artists' intentions:

- What do your art artworks aim to say?
- How do your artworks comment on current social or political issues?
- What motivates you to use costumes/dresses/clothes in your performances?
- Which social issues or subjects are you addressing with your artworks?
- Which common social commentaries are made through your artworks?

5.2.1 Steven Cohen

Throughout *Chandelier* (2001) Figures 4.3 and 4.9, Steven Cohen's performance relates to the *Sublime* theory, as explained by Longinus (1890:1-13), that the Sublime and Beautiful is a relationship between passions (*i.e. emotions, feelings*) and words (*i.e. expressing a point of view, creating, and conveying meaning, and interpretation*). While Jeremy Willard (2015) rightly pointed out that Cohen's intention with *Chandelier* (2001) was to place the focus squarely on pain, the idea behind venturing into a squatter camp was to contrast opulence and squalor.



Figure 5.1: Steven Cohen, *Chandelier* (2001). Art Intervention, Newtown.

Even with the system of apartheid gone, destitution is still widespread, and a lack of proper housing and unemployment, despite years of promises, has not been adequately addressed. Cohen's choice of this location was thus central in drawing attention to some of the social ills that still abound in South Africa. Ironically, the squatter camp which formed the backdrop of his performance was demolished that very same day.

A strong sense of contrast was furthermore brought to the fore by juxtaposing creation and destruction, abundance and scarcity, progress and deterioration, all in the same space and time settings. Cohen's intention was to record on film the utter destitution of the inhabitants, being made even bitterer in the turmoil of their homes being destroyed in what would be highly reminiscent of painful incidents which would play out during the days of apartheid. The choice of setting was thus quite obviously premeditated to fully support and help bring across the social commentary art in the most effective manner possible. Cohen's painstaking attention to detail guaranteed that his performative social commentary art would achieve the desired effect, namely, to expose and accentuate the miserable conditions of the individuals who made up that particular community very clearly.

In a review of *Chandelier*, Madeleine Copp (2015) quoted Cohen as saying, "My moving in a chandelier-tutu through a squatter camp being demolished and filming it that's what I'm doing, a digital painting of social reality to shed light on what is seldom seen, by creating amid destruction". Cohen's visit to the squatter camp on the day of its destruction was all but coincidental but rather carefully chosen. Being nothing new in the South African context, the forced removal of black families thus forms the subject matter of Cohen's performance and the wider commentary which exists on this topic. However, the performance is silent on the matter of just where the Newtown families were being evicted. This may be interpreted as the aspects of making visible the unrepresentable which in this case made the performance ambiguous and lose its intended purpose.

Despite the performance's success, it nonetheless upset some of the residents, as seen in Figure 4.3. Seeing this rather strange-looking white male parading around among them in their hour of need, one cannot help noticing the obvious discomfort

and annoyance experienced by the woman who has her arm raised – as if signalling to Cohen that being among them is no concern of his. The performance also received quite a cold reception from art and academic commentators due to the bizarre nature of it all, some even criticising Cohen as being insensitive. However, *Chandelier* would go on to have a showing in Toronto, Canada, whereupon Copp (2015) expressed his absolute disappointment:

I found that the Chandelier shines a light on something, just not the struggles of the squatter camp in Newtown, Johannesburg. Instead, the audience sits through a half-hour video, filmed in 2001, of Cohen wandering through Newtown in his Chandelier dress code. In my opinion, the show smacks of the absolute worst kind of so-called 'enlightened' and 'progressive' performance, using a black community, with their day-to-day existence, as props for a white man's art.

Despite some dismissive comments, the video stills nonetheless seems to show that some residents entertained Cohen's presence and supported what he set out to achieve; whether the support is misplaced is, of course debatable. Some concerns regarding the production of the film have been raised, citing manipulative intent regarding the residents of Newtown and its destruction. The visual and performative elicited in *Chandelier* highlights the extreme poverty prevalent among many communities in South Africa. This, in turn, highlights the importance of setting, which again underlines the fact that the project cannot be seen as separate from its very site-specific context.

In *Chandelier*, Cohen advanced the idea of "*creation and destruction*" in contrast to Falko's concept, evidenced in *Once Upon A Town*. In *Once Upon a Town*, Falko travelled first in South Africa, then outside the borders, painting murals of elephants on walls and exteriors of homes of ordinary people. Falko expanded on the meaning of creation in his painting of homes by spending quality time among the residents of low-cost housing and adding value to their homes. His graffiti furthermore addressed pressing issues that lie at the heart of the community. Falko mingled with the residents and got their permission to paint their homes, the outcome was that many expressed their great appreciation of the work. What made the work even more personal is that Falko also grew up in a disadvantaged community characterised by poverty. As such, he believed that his presence and sincerity would hopefully be meaningful and add

something of value to the residents' lives. Falko, on his part, also benefited by learning more about the diverse cultures found in South Africa and elsewhere where he painted his murals. Unlike Cohen, Falko placed more direct emphasis on the concept of value by changing someone's perception of what might be the only luxury they have access to, a home.

In stark contrast to what Falko set out to achieve, Cohen did not visit a squatter camp to positively change the inhabitants' perception of their property and their surroundings, but his presence was quite possibly driven by his own personal, political, and artistic agendas. Even though the point of the performance was to draw attention to the stark social make-up of the squatter community, it was nonetheless overshadowed by the almost unthinkable destitution and living conditions of people who were promised a better life during this country's recent political campaigns and the very same government they voted for. The further detail that the residents were being relocated on that very same day further frustrated the effect of the performance as it elicited frustration with the somewhat outrageous display of decadence among all that ruin and hardship. Despite drawing attention to what could have been nothing more than a bizarre artistic or fashion statement, the performance possibly achieved little more than eliciting anger at the current government – and maybe rightly so – and perhaps this is where Cohen, ironically, delivered his master stroke.

In the context of Steven Cohen's performances, the denotative explanation is his cross-dress performative style costume, make-up and other glittery facial accessories he uses when he frequently presents, performs, and presents his visual art. A denotation interpretation of a white man walking naked in a messy black community crowded with shacks is one thing, as the community is wondering what he is doing in their neighbourhood naked. The connotation of the performance can be interpreted as a white man exhibiting "the gay tradition of drag" in the same social setting is something very unconventional. Furthermore, as a performer, this can be interpreted as he wanted to demonstrate the pain and conditions in which black people in that community were living through the performative social commentary. One can agree that he was able to articulate the content efficiently.

Another contrasting example is that of Vivian Mokome, who used a similar location to Steven Cohen but was received differently by the audience during her artistic performance titled *“Focus despite the obvious distraction”* (2020), Figure 5.1. Vivian paraded on the streets where she grew up dressed in a smart and dignified ball gown dress. According to Vivian, her performance was about an African woman dressed in the best and latest fabrics to represent her culture. She walked in the same streets that raised her and allowed the same soil she grew up to witness the beauty of this African woman. She walked amongst the same people who she grew up with in her childhood. This African woman stands in the same spots she used to stand waiting for a taxi and uses the same directions she used to take to get to a store. She further stated that her performance is about embracing the same routes. Although physically she may have changed, her roots will never change. At the end of the day, no matter the changes in her or the world, she will return home because it is where she belongs.



Figure 5.2: Vivian Mokome, *Focus despite the obvious distraction*, 2020.

Given the privilege that Vivian Mokome was born and brought up in the very same location, it was easy for her performance to be received with love because of the visible positive changes in her lifestyle. Unlike Steven Cohen, who looked out of place in an unfamiliar area with an immoral dress code, Vivian was perceived as moral within the community standards. Thus, it can be said that Steven Cohen took his artistic expression beyond acceptable cultural values. Hence, it did not make an instant

positive impact. In terms of social commentary art, Vivian's dress code portrays her as a Queen in her own rights and respectable. She believes that African women must perceive themselves as "*Queens*" and dignified and worthy to be heard and respected. She further stated that her "Focus despite the obvious distraction" performance was about women standing tall, strong, and bold in places that raised them to become the queens that they are today. Thus, Vivian's artistic expression was well appreciated and accepted, as it was seen as promoting the moral fibre as the foundation, especially due to Vivian's dress code, which was seen as presentable and dignified.

5.2.2 Wezile Mgibe

The most prominent symbol in Wezile Mgibe's performance entitled *Collecting Bodies*, 2017, is a bandage Figures 4.4 and 4.10. According to the artist, the performance highlights voices, bodies and objects that reflect human behaviour and reactions in unwelcoming spaces. He added that the dress code has a long history in his culture and it represents a lot of meaning, and that it is not something new, "I wanted to present something familiar because the artwork does not only belong to me but to the people". He addresses inequality and mental and domestic violations and uses his art as a tool for social change.

His work seeks to express wounds, pains, scars, social class and living standards on how the wounds are hidden, the pains and deep scars are hidden in the name of looks and the dress code. His dress code and bandages in this performance disguise his gender. Others can say she or he is hiding his or her wounds, pains, and scars very well with the gilts and glamour of this world. Figure 4.4 shows a human figure holding a cigarette in his or her hand. This can be interpreted as that the cigarette is used as a coping mechanism to suppress pain and to pass through what she or he is feeling inside.

One can say that she or he has found a way to bury her or his own emotions and feelings in his heart. She or he has found herself the worldly things that somehow perhaps put her or him to sleep at night. His or her definition of beauty is external. It is how people see her or him but do not understand that true beauty lies within, and it is not found in material things. The diamond earring is shining on her or his ears as a poignant pain that runs deep in what she or he feels inside. In summation of

interpreting this artwork, one can say sometimes people used dress codes to bury their pain and sorrow in the gilts and glamour of this world. The shining earring does not necessarily represent the emotions within, but the bigger picture that lies within. Some people do not take the time to be true to themselves, to do soul searching, and to understand the soul better. In a world based on material power, the inner person within us always goes through a search for oneness, which is deprived by our observation of influential matters.

The artwork clearly expresses pride and knowledge of self. It says I will overcome challenges, but not easily. It is a challenging situation that will require a full grasp of his emotions rather than actions. To the viewers, it could be advised that under the given circumstances, one must deal with the difficulties presented to them regardless of the conditions presented. He or she is proud but not happy about the ongoing situation at hand. The artwork again expresses political, economic, and human rights issues. The dress code gives the impression of a proud mother of the nation who is subjected to various pains that the community is facing. However, others might argue that she is not a woman but a man dressed in a woman's dress code, although it still bestows the same emotions of pain and struggle.

According to Wezile, the performance entitled ART 1 (2019) Figure 4.10 expresses issues of identity and equality. He further states that these are centred around the soul searching and identity, inequalities of disadvantaged persons. To be precise, their struggle and even our own mental and physiological struggles (see Appendix C2). In this performance, he is seen wearing a black dress with a white cotton wool mess shaped like clouds or a thick smoke from a destructive missile or fire covering his head. He said that the work addresses the issues of how black people have stepped out of their own identity to live in this world that was created by other people's concepts and ideologies. It exploits issues of race and how black people, to be precise, have lost their true ways of living and adopted the Western ones, and they forgot the truth about what it means to be them regarding their identity. The cotton wool mess on top of the bandage can be interpreted in many ways, as that the body that is carrying the head is releasing the smoke of a missile or it is residing in clouds.

In terms of representation, a lot can be omitted with regard to the artistic expression and the message being put across. This correlates with Lyotard (1984), of the “common feature of modern art that bears the unrepresentable in what is represented. It makes visible the unrepresentable by means of allusion. The portrayal of the unrepresentable as a missing component in the artefact is an expression of the Kantian notion of the sublime”.

As mentioned by Lyotard (1984), the curiosity is raised in a deceptive manner to fill in the gaps that can only be felt but not explained by word of mouth. The cotton expresses a very questionable unlimited pain that speaks to someone seeking emotional help from within than focusing on the outside world. Answers and solutions to the pains felt could only be expressed without causing any harm to any social or cultural set-up.

5.2.3 Carin Bester

Carin Bester's intentions in her “My Body My Life for 16 days of Activism” 2017 Street Intervention was to move people away from the state of being so desensitised - as a nation and no longer react to the horrific crimes. Her performance aimed to raise awareness for the community to react to the issues of concern on their own. She wanted people to feel something and, as a result, reach out to help and create change. In her own words, she stated that:

I aim to start a dialogue around the issue which I speak of in my work. Most of my work highlights gender-based violence and other oppressions of womxn, children and the LGBTQIA+ community, although it's not limited to that. I want to create awareness. I want people to be aware of the reality of these issues, as I want to move people away from the state of being so desensitized - we as a nation no longer react to these horrific crimes. I want people to feel something and, as a result, reach out to help create change.

She often uses South Africa Police Service (SAPS) statistics formally promulgated annually for the country on a national platform as a reference. However, she considers that these statistics are manipulated as a cover-up due to unreported criminal activities that are not on the database. She believes so much is happening, but it goes unseen. She views it as a starting point, even if not all-inclusive and to her, it is still a horrific number. To her, unsubstantiated statistics cannot be shot down as a lie or

exaggeration, they still form part of the artwork creation. She uses this to show the severity of the reality out there. She uses dress code to create visual representations of the affected numbers and create images that provoke and trigger emotions. In “*My Body My Life*” Figures 4.6 and 4.7, she addresses gender-based violence.

In this installation/performance, which took place in Cape Town at Youngblood Gallery, she wore a large white hoop skirt (a plinth was utilised effectively to enable the skirt to reflect its length by standing on it). As expressed on the dress code, the performance reflected the statistics of both gender-based violence/abuse of women and children. On the skirt, she had written statistics and sentences from news articles about GBV and Femicide. Her body is painted with white substance as she indicated that this was for the creation of a white/ empty canvas. Once again, the idea of a white or empty canvas relates to the idea of infinity as it allows the viewers to elaborate on the meaning based on their own lived experiences. Like any other canvas, a white canvas has no limits in terms of artistic expression, as clearly reflected in Wezile Mgibe’s artistic expression. Her head is wrapped in the South African National flag as she held a pole with a blood bag dripping down on her. She stood for five hours, and as time went by, the amount of blood flowing from the blood bag drip increased in flow. The flow represents the blood of GBV victims in SA. This tied into the soundtrack, which was humming the South African national anthem by a group of femme people. The aim of this piece was to create awareness around GBV and as social commentary to draw people’s attention not to turn a blind eye or ignore these horrific realities as if they are not happening. Gender-based violence does not affect just one group of people; it happens to everyone and does not discriminate between race, age, or gender. Carin's performance, “*My Body My Life*”, culminated into a national campaign of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence, whereby the performance took place not only indoors but in the Central Business District of Cape Town and in front of the Parliament.

The white hoop skirts displayed two messages: “16 Days of Activism 25 Nov – 10 Dec, as seen from the front, and on the back “, Stop Violence Against Women and Children”. The criminal statistics were reflected on her body, and she no longer carries a blood bag dripping down on her; instead, she carries a South African National flag that looked wetly dripped by blood and some scattered on her skirt.

Moreover, on the performance titled “*Dress of Remembrance*” (Fig. 4.11), Carin created the dress and wore it on 1 Aug 2018 for the iconic nationwide “#*TheTotalShutdownMarch*”. This march was the beginning of a movement leading to a great shift within South Africa towards more awareness and an active fight for change to end GBV. She was wearing a black dress, much like a funeral dress, but exposing more skin and the body. According to her, the reason why she exposed more of her skin was defiance against the often-asked question to a rape victim, what were you wearing? Women are often told to cover up their bodies to protect themselves from sexual violence.

Carin’s performances clearly display her strong stance against gender-based violence, the oppression of the femme, and murders of women, femme, and children from all walks of life, and she strongly advocates against it, fearlessly and fiercely. She is using dress code to stage performances, which exhibit social commentary. She goes to extreme lengths using dress code to evoke a reaction or response to GBV. For example, her choice of dresses in her artistic performances gives weight to the intent of the social commentary, which I believe is to shift focus to the violation women and children go through at the hands of men. The expression of imprisonment (the use of shackles), the blood-strained undergarments, and the white dresses/canvases also add to the very core of the social commentary art exhibited by her performances as these specifications on the dress codes express the extreme seriousness of the impact of what women and children go through in and around the country.

Her performances can be viewed as strong and powerful social commentary art as it shows a powerful major outcry to fight against gender-based violence in South Africa. Life has a bigger influence on her than actual people. Hence, she has realised that it is the things that happen in life that move her to create artworks and atrocities caused by people to people. These happenings and people might not be good, yet they do influence her to create artworks towards change. She has mentioned people and other artists, such as Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović and South African Visual Performance Artist Steven Cohen, whose works inspire her artistic expression.

The social commentary art displayed in multiple performances of many South African artists does create a sense of worry (if not anxiety) with regard to the numerous incidents of GBV. The emotions are raw and somewhat unedited and may feel to me like something the artist may have been affected by directly or indirectly- making her choice of artistic expressions in all her performances much more relatable or thought-provoking and more especially, accessible. As such, when an audience unravels through the performances, it leaves an open cut/wound. Specific dress codes in social commentary art can send deep messages to the audience, which is what it takes to evoke awareness.

5.3 INTERPRETATION OF THE FOCUS GROUPS OF THE SIX CHOSEN ARTISTS' ARTWORKS

The three focus groups (A, B and C) were presented with the three Artists' performances, Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe and Carin Bester, as well as the installations/sculptures/photographs of Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare and Nandipha Mntambo. The latter group of artists were chosen because their artworks are characteristic of performance art and also utilised clothing. The focus groups analysed and interpreted these artworks to discover whether their interpretations first reflect their prior and/or culturally constructed knowledge and whether they (focus groups' interpretations) relate to the intended messages the artists were relaying through their artworks. These analyses and interpretations were necessary to ascertain the impact of the artwork, in particular the chosen costumes and dress codes, in relaying the artists' intended messages and meanings to the focus group participants. This was also to discover first, whether clothing/costumes/dress codes relay similar messages and interpretations when used in artistic performances as in social and cultural environments. Secondly, whether performance costumes and accessories on their own or without the performance can influence the interpretation of the messages and meanings the artworks/performances are conveying.

5.3.1 Focus groups' interpretation of Steven Cohen's performance

The three focus groups were unanimous. The chandelier in Cohen's performance represented light due to its original function, which is a lighting accessory. However, the representation of this light was seen and viewed differently: first, that he is himself the light; secondly, that he has brought it; and thirdly, that he was playing the race

card. This is because the race card playing may have tamed the squatter camp community; hence, there was little reaction to Steven's presence among them. He received special treatment due to him being a white gay man. He was also seen as playing with the feelings of poor people, belittling their plight of poverty during this hour of need. His act of coming to them wearing a chandelier as a dress code and almost half naked was seen to be provocative on all fronts, demeaning to others as his image was insensitive to the poor people who had a lot to digest at that moment as they did not even know where they were going to be relocated to. Instead of bringing a solution, he is seen to be playing their plight down and only interested in making an artwork out of their painful experience. This is because he was performing with a smile on his face, and his body language was playful. This also echoes Copp's (2015) statement that he was "using a black (poor) community, with their day-to-day existence, as props for a white man's art", and therefore the performance seemed outrageous.

Bringing light to a squatter camp was associated with the fact that it was supposed to negate darkness, and unfortunately, there was no immediate impact on his performance except that it was seen as some kind of entertainment at the wrong moment. According to some of the participants, the squatter camp in Steven Cohen's performance represents darkness; hence, he had to take light to it (the squatter camp), implying that most dark things are associated with poverty and substandard housing in squatter camps. Another interpretation was associated with him being gay and that the light he is bringing to the squatter camp might be to conscientise the community about LGBTQIA+ subjects, something that is seen as taboo in such a community. His nakedness was also associated with the protest against GBV, referencing the women's marches where they protested half-naked.

Bringing the light was also seen negatively as showing off his opulent background and portrayal of the upper class, juxtapositioning it with the poor and impoverished setting of the squatter camp. It was also interpreted as showing the inequality between whites and blacks, the disparity between rich and poor that still exists in the democratic era. While this latter interpretation was spot on, however, it was criticised and angered the democratic government.

Figure 5.1 depicts a still image from his performance showing a woman pointing her finger, signalling Steven Cohen to leave them. Standing behind the woman is what seems to be a child sucking her thumb, probably in disbelief, at this gay white man wearing high heels and walking uncomfortably as if he is walking on clouds. One cannot stop wondering what is going on in the little girl's mind. So, this image was thought-provoking but insensitive to the people who live in poverty. Thus, the overall interpretation of this performance is that it was pitched a bit high for this type of setting. It is not clear whether it was the artist's intention to use the squatter camp just as the backdrop, even though this may have rendered his performance meaningless and ambiguous to them (the Squatter camp community). However, it may have made sense to the elite artistic community. This then leads to the questioning of the extent to which ethics must be observed when an artist is using an uncensored setting as a backdrop to his/her performance.

However, judging Steven Cohen's explanation that "by my moving in a chandelier-tutu through a squatter camp being demolished, and filming it, I'm creating a digital painting of a social reality, half beautifully imagined, half horribly real", it can still be argued that from his perspective as the creator he did achieve his intended objective, and maybe to a certain extent to the artistic elite point of view. Thus, this performance may have been represented with the intention to provoke all the responses it evoked, and it can be said it was intentional as the artist describes his field of specialisation as "Risk-taking". Thus, risk-taking can mean not only physically endangering himself but also gambling with reading or receiving of the meaning and messages he is conveying to the viewers.

The interpretation of Steven Cohen's performance by the focus groups had elements from their prior knowledge triggered by the symbolism the artist used, such as the chandelier, make-up, and high heels that were associated with the drag queen's parade; hence, he was easily identified as a gay man. Another point is that the chandelier tutu dress the artist was wearing was seen as outrageous and unheard of as a dress; hence, it was seen as taboo and somehow disrespectful to that community. The chandelier as a dress somehow downplayed the artist's intention to a certain extent, especially in that community. The symbolism of dress code and accessories, the squatter camp setting as a backdrop, and the whole body language all formed the

semiotics Steven Cohen chose, and they had a major influence on the viewers' interpretation, all serving as tools of agency for his performance.

5.3.2 Focus groups' interpretation of Wezile Mgibe's performance

The use of a bandage and the accompanying dress code and accessories in Wezile Mgibe's performance was seen by the focus groups as representing a killer, female (a French woman), investigator, white person, dead person, or ghost. The artist's explanation, on the other hand, asserts that his work seeks to "highlight voices, bodies and objects that reflect human behaviour and reactions in unwelcoming spaces, and enabling people to share feelings without violating their sense of self or exposing them to further trauma". The groups further interpreted the use of the white bandage as the symbol of the transformation of the performer, stating that his use of a dress and earrings to transform himself into a woman may make one wonder if he is true to himself or losing himself. The group further pointed out that the performer may have been informed by the world about who he is. He is losing himself and might not be comfortable in the dress. The performer is also seen as advancing the struggle of white women and French women not only by decoding the cigarette but also by the French setting.

Other than being viewed as the French woman's portrayal, the performer is also viewed as the detective who is investigating a GBV crime because of the cigarette that, according to the groups, is associated with an investigator. The papers lying on the floor may further represent an ongoing investigation about the death of the person whose image is portrayed by the white outlined drawing on the ground. The wrapped face with a bandage was interpreted as representing a dead person or a mummy.

The overall interpretation of Wezile's performance by the focus groups was seen to express the wounded, pains, and scars and that it was commenting on social class and living standards and how the wounds are covered by bandages; the pains and deep scars are hidden beneath the bandage and the dress. A cigarette was interpreted as a coping mechanism. Thus, the artist's explanation that his work represents "inequalities, unwelcoming spaces, mental and domestic violation towards social change", although a bit ambiguous, is not far-fetched from the groups'

interpretations. In this case, the artist has somehow managed to incite thought-provoking responses in line with his intended social commentary message.

The chosen symbols, especially the bandage and the white dress, led the viewers to a multiplicity of meanings due to their prior knowledge associated with these items, hence associated them with transformation, hiding behind both the bandage and the dress, and death and a mummy. The fact that Wezile is a name associated with the male gender, those participants who knew Wezile as a boy/man name were immediately aware that the body behind the bandages and the white dress was a man. A male wearing a dress associated with the female dress code is questionable and may lead to more connotations than if it was worn by a woman. The performance costume and accompanying accessories Mgibe is using render his performance a bit ambiguous due to culturally constructed meaning known to the viewers. Mgibe's symbolism, although of a mundane nature, may mean anything. So once again, Mgibe's chosen semiotics/symbols had a blurring influence on the interpretation of his performance, leading to yet other ambiguous meanings and messages. It is not clear whether his intended message was relayed effectively through this performance. His performance provided the viewers with open-ended meaning, making his intended message not comprehensible.

5.3.3 Focus groups' interpretation of Carin Bester's performance

The focus groups identified the South African National Anthem and the Flag as well as the LGBTQIA+ flag, the word womxn, 365 days, and faces of GBV victims who died in Carin Bester's performance. They were identified as a way to acknowledge that GBV and homophobia are scourges South Africa is battling. While there were concerns about Bester's inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ concept in her performance, which was clearly seen to be addressing the scourge of GBV and the killing of children, her message was still meaningful and accessible to the viewers due to her use of explicit mundane symbols. When she was explaining what her work is about, she said:

I aim to start a dialogue around the issue that highlights gender-based violence and other oppressions of womxn, children and the LGBTQIA+ community, although it's not limited to that. I want to create awareness. I want people to be aware of the reality of these issues, as I want

to move people away from the state of being so desensitised - we as a nation no longer react to these horrific crimes. I want people to feel something and, as a result, reach out to help create change.

The focus groups interpreted the artist's intention accordingly due to her explicit symbolism, and since GBV is a well-known phenomenon in South Africa, the viewer did not struggle to identify with the used symbols. It can be said that her social commentary art was accessible, and the use of colours, dress code and other prompts were successful in relaying the artist's intended message. What made Bester's message more accessible was mainly her use of text, which enhanced the meaning of her performance, making it evocative. Her use of text was successful, although its use was unconventional.

5.3.4 Focus groups' interpretation of Mary Sibande's artworks

The focus groups' interpretation of Mary Sibande's "*They Don't Make Them Like They Used To*", 2008 (Figure 4.12) was first based on the fact that the artist is one of the South African contemporary artists, and her character Sophie, a domestic worker or servant, relates to many South African people - black and white. Secondly, the Superman symbol (also a well-known film and TV character) on the jersey Sophie is knitting leads them to associate Sophie with a superwoman. The dress code of a domestic worker, especially the white apron, is easily identifiable even to a person who does not know anything about Sibande's works. Sophia/Sophie's Mary Sibande was also interpreted as addressing the stereotypes associated with domestic workers by transforming her uniform into a lavish and gigantic dress, ironically removing the ability to perform domestic chores to an adorable figure deserving of respect and honour. Thus, the group's interpretation of a superwoman also befits the artist's portrayal of Sophie.

In the second artwork, "*A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern Series*", 2013 in Figure 4.14, where Mary Sibande used the purple colour, an octopus-like creature, a creature hanging above Mary Sibande Sophie, and the spiral objects around her neck, the groups described the installation as symbolising her Sophie's many networks. The purple colour is associated with royalty, nobility, and wealthiness. It is also important to note that the purple colour and the octopus-like creature portray her as delicate and

beautiful. Multitasking was identified as one of Sibande's Sophie's attributes, which is also portrayed by the more than 8-legged octopus-like creature.

What makes Sibande's Sophie, especially in "*A Terrible Beauty, The Purple Shall Govern*", impactful is the presence of the unrepresented aspect of nobility as portrayed by both the Victorian-style dress and the purple colour. Thus, the groups' prior knowledge of the symbolism made the work accessible. Similar to Carin Bester's use of mundane and popular symbols, Sibande's use of the purple colour and the Victorian dress made her works accessible; the viewers corroborated the artist's intentions and message. It can be said, therefore, that the choice of relevant symbolism is important in activism or social commentary art for the accessibility of the meaning. Although the purple colour was intentionally used by the artist to reference a painful experience associated with apartheid, the group's interpretation attests to the need to subvert the past stereotypes and in solidarity with the artist's intention, as alluded to by the secondary title, "The Purple Shall Govern". This can also suggest hope for a better future for both the domestic workers and black people in general. Sibande's and Bester's use of female dresses in their performances imbued with extra symbolism, such as text for Bester and Victorian dress style and an apron for Sibande, enhanced their messages, making them explicit. This is again due to their use of mundane material cultural objects.

5.3.5 Focus groups' interpretation of Yinka Shonibare's artworks

In the *Woman Shooting Cherry Blossoms* (Figure 4.16), the focus groups had difficulty interpreting the work until they were presented with the artist's explanation. They interpreted that the gun meant power, death and killing, fighting, and the cherry blossom life, or even peace at the same time. The gun being used is a weapon of destruction, symbolising the effect of colonialism on the African culture. Of course, all their analysis and interpretation of Shonibare's work was facilitated by the viewers having been given the artist's explanation of intended messages. Another interpretation was that the hand of colonialism is still portrayed with the gun the woman is carrying and choosing the blooming cherry associated with the African continent. The point of colonialism being a global phenomenon was said to be represented by the globe of the world map as the head obscuring individual's identities. Another view was that the tree branches of cherry blossoming emerging from the gun were a

representation of the West taking African resources through violence.

In contrast to the four artists discussed above who wore the dresses on their bodies, Shonibare is dressing up women figures in female dress codes and makes them perform brave tasks associated with masculinity. This is seen by the viewers as elevating a woman figure to rise to power or to be responsible for their progress, subverting the dominant patriarchal belief system upheld worldwide.

In Shonibare's *Leisure Lady* (with ocelots), 2001, the group identified the woman with three leopard-like cats, hand gestures, having tamed the animals and being able to hold them with one hand, and again associated this act with woman power. In this performative installation, Yinka Shonibare explained that the leopard-like cats depict royalty and, secondly, that the femininity and independence of the woman handling the three wildest creatures portray the strength of women, which is often overlooked. This could also refer to the lack of underrepresentation of women leaders in the African continent or the world at large. One of the participants in group C remarked on the potential readiness for a female president in South Africa. It could also be referring to the cautioning about the dependence of the African continent to the West under the male-dominated leadership and suggesting a change that must recognise the women for African countries' leadership.

Overall, the groups recognised that Yinka Shonibare's artworks are questioning the Eurocentric identity and class. Through his artworks, he is breaking the silence on white superiority and perceptions that blacks are inferior. The Victorian dress code was seen as representing and celebrating black power, which must be recognised and respected alongside the Western one. Shonibare's work was seen by the group as breaking the stereotypes that manifest the disparities between class, race, and gender, as well as between females and males. Yinka Shonibare's artworks can also be described as cross-cultural, incorporating various elements from other cultures, such as both British and African symbols. His symbolism seeks to represent both British colonial and African histories and to deconstruct the grand narratives rooted in the history of power and Western empire.

Shonibare's characters usually reveal the agonising condition of human beings caught between two cultures, African and Western, and breathing the bipolar nature where the relationship between colony and metropolis, white and black, poor and rich, traditional and contemporary society modulates to a new cultural individual. Shonibare's symbolism, although depicting day-to-day objects and their representation in his performative installations, is not easily comprehensible without his explanation. In addition, even the titles are also not explicit, making his performative installation's messages not only open-ended but mysterious. This means that clothing and dress codes alone cannot relay the messages the artwork is conveying without other chosen accessories, posture or disposition, body language and sometimes without a brief explanation to the viewers as this leads to them (the viewers) being tongue-tied and confused.

5.3.6 Focus groups' interpretation of Nandipha Mntambo's artworks

In Nandipha Mntambo's "*Enchantment*", 2012 the groups identified a masculine-looking and headless human figure impression made from cowhide, hence asserting that it resembles a man (human being, not male) and associating it with power, wealth, ancestors, strength, and a mother (Nandipha Mntambo's mother who is a source of strength for her).

Nandipha Mntambo's works consist of figurative cowhide sculptures which symbolise the relationship between humans and nature and address current debates around traditional gender roles, body politics and identity. Her work explores the liminal boundaries between human and animal, femininity and masculinity and, attraction and repulsion, life and death. Her realistic moulds stress the black feminist agenda or notions of 'Africanicity', and her bovine-like characters deal with pastoral tradition and cultural heritage practices such as lobola (the bride price), which is facilitated through the exchange of cattle from the groom's family to the bride's in recognition of the marital relationship between the two families. Mntambo's art subverts cultural signifiers like the cowhide to create work that pushes boundaries with a distinct look and feel, challenging how the material is used, interpreted, and understood.

On *Inkunzi Emnyama*, groups A and B found it difficult to read the work until after the

researcher had shown them the artist's explanation. However, group C was obviously influenced by the first work, *Enchantment*. They identified the cowhide throw-over/jacket the artist is wearing and related it to its significance in the African culture, hereby associating it with Nandipha's mother's support. After they were presented with the explanation of the artist, the groups identified the difference between the cowhide dress and the artist's dress code she was wearing in the performance, suggesting that they each convey different messages and meanings.

According to Nandipha Mntambo, *Inkunzi Emnyama* (the black bull) was shot in a deserted bullfighting arena in Mozambique, a Portuguese colony. "The once-impressive concrete structure is now dilapidated, and grandstands are devoid of noise and excitement". In these works, the bullfighter, or matador, meditatively enters what Mntambo calls a solemn ritual of dressing before the fight. The matador's uniform – traje de luces, or suit of lights – is usually worn by men because there are very few female bullfighters worldwide. Mntambo, however, merges male and female qualities in these and other works. Loneliness is exposed despite the flashy exhibit of this flamboyant sport. This is because the performance has kept a distance between the actor and the audience, as she is captured as the solitary player, in front of the gigantic building used as the backdrop. Mntambo merges actor, subject and observer in an extraordinary way by emphasising the private moment of fear, experienced by both the bull and the bullfighter (Nandipha Mntambo Catalogue 2013).

The group's interpretation of Mntambo's *Enchantment* was mainly guided by the cowhide figure, tails spread on the floor where the ghost-like figure stands with presence, confidence, and dignity, as well as the serenity portrayed with the white background or setting. In *Inkunzi Emnyama*, the red cloth, the dress code is similar to that of a Jockey underneath the cowhide throw-over/jacket with an elaborated back that looks like a tapestry or collage of cut animal skins, which are arranged to form a thick mess extending the artist's backside. In this performance, Nandipha Mntambo portrays herself as both the bull and the bull aggravator. She represents the bull because of the cowhide that she wore while representing the bull aggravator because of the red cloth that she held. In other words, this may mean that Nandipha Mntambo is a strong woman who can be as angry as the bull. Mntambo's combination of

conventional and unconventional materials in her artworks can be said to be confronting the societally expected norms surrounding cultural identity and heritage.

The focus groups' prior or cultural knowledge informed their reading of the works, hence associating it with the African cultural significance of cattle and livestock in general. The cow is also associated with giving and nurturing, hence related to a mother as a nurturer, and in this case, Nandipha is said to be honouring her mother as the source of her strength. The strength is also portrayed by the artist's performance of a game traditionally associated with men. The elements used by Mntanbo as prompts/symbols influenced their interpretation of the artworks due to the participants' cultural knowledge.

5.4 INTERPRETATION OF THE FOCUS GROUPS' KEY INFORMANTS

From the three focus groups, four key informants were selected with the purpose of giving detailed interpretations of the open-ended meanings regarding the impact of the six artists' artworks as social commentary art. This section attempts to unpack the responses from the participants to discover their views on the effectiveness of the chosen artworks on social commentary.

On Steven Cohen, the four informants added that his act of parading half naked in a squatter camp that is being destroyed can be seen as being complicit with the destruction around him because rather than bringing attention to the destruction of people's lives, he is emphasising his own artistic vision to an audience that is clearly appalled by his performance. This performance makes one think of how the rich focus on themselves instead of using their money (their light) to help those in need. Therefore, like an over-decorated chandelier, the rich do not fulfil their original purpose. The make-up on his head was seen to resemble clouds displaying that his "head is in the clouds"; he is not aware of what is happening around him. His performance was described as a cultural shock to this community. The message he is conveying was said to be problematic as it clashed with the culture of his audience. This is because seeing a naked man wearing an unconventional outfit was taboo to the squatter camp people. Hence, his message got lost, perhaps due to how conservative traditional African culture often does not align with contemporary views such as gender fluidity as opposed to culturally constructed gender roles. The

informants' additional views on Steven Cohen's performance were that it was not effective as it did not evoke an instant and positive response from the community that was used as a backdrop but was seen as exploitative and insensitive.

On Wezile Mgibe, the bandage was further interpreted as cautioning the viewers to exercise empathy and care and to re-evaluate one's thoughts and behaviour. The cottonwool-like mess was said to be symbolising commotion or confusion in his head. The other prompts represent the death of the self in the union of marriage, the self-destructive nature of a materialistic society and the problem of decadence in the contemporary world—renewal or rebirth like a caterpillar evolving into a butterfly. In a sense, the informants felt that Mgibe's performance was not very clear and lacked coherence due to the various and unrelated symbols. This brings to the fore the issue of the choice of symbols and how they attempt to relay a clear and logical message.

On Carin Bester's, the informants agree that the artist is commenting on a social reality that requires special attention and that any efforts can never be enough until the scourge of GBV and femicide is addressed. The advocacy to combat these scourges is eminent. Bester's performance is very relevant and needed as a catalyst towards social change.

In Sibande's "*They Don't Make Them Like They Used To*", 2008 the informants added that the blue colour symbolises integrity and the material used on the lady knitting showcases how women of colour are seen as the superheroes of society and shine light on the importance of their role in the communities and the sacrifices they make. On both of Sibande's Sophies, the informants further added that she (Sophie) is presented to showcase her strength and resilience required as a multitasking and a superwoman paying tribute to the domestic workers in general. The entire symbolism used, the uniform or dress code, and the body language were effective, making the work accessible as social commentary art.

On Shonibare's two artworks, the respondent added that the works represent love, purity and the need for black people, especially women, to aspire for dominance and take control of their progress. Although Shonibare's works were not easy to read, the informants corroborated that the objective of his works was to convince women to

become more aggressive in their fight for equality. Shonibare's works address pertinent issues and do, in a way, drive the message home as social commentary art due to his portrayal of his subjects as brave and courageous.

On Mntambo, the informants asserted that her work, first and foremost, suggests that one's sense of identity and belonging is deeply intertwined within culture, which is passed down through generations. This instils a sense of pride and appreciation of cultural heritage, serving as a source of strength and resilience in navigating modern challenges. The female figures in her works represent a powerful force that is unafraid to confront the challenges women are faced with in their fight for equality. Another perspective was that the woman in the image is asserting her authority and taking control of a situation. The "*Inkunzi Emnyama*" is described as a woman performing roles traditionally associated with men, showing that times are changing and that women are fearless and embracing dangerous challenges. While Mntambos's works are also somehow not easily readable, when one knows what the artist is conveying, their messages and meanings make needed and valuable social commentaries regarding the upholding of cultural identity heritage.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the emergent data, to a certain extent, has confirmed this study's postulation that clothing in artistic expression plays an important role due to its cultural construction meanings. These cultural constructions, in turn, influence the viewers' interpretations when reading the messages the artworks relay and sometimes lead to controversial judgments, especially in social commentary art. Thus, performance costumes in art that comment on various societal concerns and issues sometimes present diversity and open-ended interpretation and meaning.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's main objective was to highlight the importance of costumes/clothing/dress codes first as a means of cultural construction and to answer the question of whether the performance can convey the same message in social commentary art without the performer's chosen costume and accessories. Secondly, it was meant to determine whether the costumes, in their own right, can convey the artist's intended message without the chosen setting or background and the performance (action and the entire body language) itself. The study postulated that clothes have a major impact on social influence, and their characteristics as cultural objects influence both the wearer and social community, individually and collectively. It emphasises the value of performance costumes in social commentary art. It sought to determine whether culturally conceived perceptions about the meaning and interpretation of a costume affect the message a performance artist is conveying. This study found that performance costumes and dress codes can sometimes lead to controversial judgment due to culturally constructed coding or prior knowledge. The study sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of the performance costumes as elements of cultural expression?
- Do clothing/costumes relay similar messages and interpretations when used in artistic performances and in social and cultural environments?
- To what extent does the performance costume influence the interpretation of the artwork/performance created?
- What tools of agency do the material contexts with and through dressing actualise the potential influence of clothing as culturally constructed symbols?

Chapter One presented a purposeful outline of how the study was going to be carried out. Chapter Two presented a comprehensive literature review and the theoretical framework. The literature review unpacked the historical development of clothing first as body protectors. Secondly, it presented clothing and dress codes as cultural constructs, arguing that when used in an artistic expression, they enhance the message the artist is conveying. The literature review also presented performative art

costumes that influence culture and social practice and as a tool for cultural and sub-cultural construction. In an effort to enrich this study's argument, various sources that deal with clothing as cultural objects and as mechanisms for performance art in social commentaries were probed. The role of clothing in art and how their use influences cultural practices as well as social discourses through people's reception and reactions were also addressed.

Theories of the Sublime and Relational aesthetics were unpacked to advance the impact of clothes as cultural objects and their influence when they are used in artistic performance. The purpose of framing this study's argument with these concepts (the sublime and relational aesthetics) was to elucidate the associated nuances of performance costumes and dress codes in general in social commentary art due to the viewers' predispositions. The literature review and the theoretical concepts enriched this research in understanding the impact of performance costumes and dress codes in social commentary art as the key elements of this study. Chapter three presented the research methodology and procedures used for data collection as well as how the chosen artists and images were selected.

Chapter four presented findings that were drawn first from the interviews of the performance artists Steven Cohen, Wezile Mgibe and Carin Bester. This was followed by the analysis and interpretation of the six chosen artists' work by the three focus group interviews. The three other artists, Mary Sibande, Yinka Shonibare, and Nandipha Mntambo's artworks, were selected to expand this study data and were meant to discover the viewers' opinions on the relationship between artists' intended messages, viewers' interpretations as well as clothing as culturally constructed objects with diverse meanings. Further probing was done through four key informants who were selected from the focus groups to provide an in-depth assessment of the impact of the chosen artworks in social commentary art.

Chapter Five drew meanings from the findings of the collected data to validate the objectives and answer the questions posed in this study. The relationship between performing artists' intentions and messages, viewers' interpretations as well as clothing as cultural constructs with diverse meanings was unpacked using the two theoretical concepts (the Sublime Theory of infinity and relational aesthetics).

Throughout this process, reference was made to denotative and connotative interpretations where denotative was represented by the identified symbolism and semiotics while connotative was based on the artists' explanations and viewers' (focus groups responses) interpretations. Thus, the artists' connotative explanations were their concealed messages and meanings, while for the viewers were their interpretations informed by their prior or cultural knowledge.

This Chapter presents a conclusion and recommendations that highlight the significance of clothing especially when they are used in social commentary art in defining new artistic and cultural norms. More importantly it seeks to reaffirm the parameters of the study, asserting how it could inform more research that has not yet been done on this topic and herald new art historical inquiries. The purpose and the objectives that have guided this study have been reiterated in this chapter to recap this study's argument. The views and assumptions that have been adopted during the course of this study are also reiterated. The study took an interpretive stance that was suitable for answering the research questions. According to Chowdhury (2014), as cited in Seshibedi (2021), interpretivist assumptions support the significance of qualitative data in the search for new knowledge generation. This viewpoint is consistent with this study as the qualitative data was obtained through a grounded research approach to find answers, messages, and meanings from the artistic expressions as well as from the participants and informants. This means that the emergent messages and meanings were grounded in the informant's and participants' own explanations and interpretations. According to Noble and Mitchell (2016:34), "Grounded theory (GT) is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analysed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups, known as social processes".

The interpretive view is based on the assumptions that humans are distinct from physical phenomena, as they contribute additional layers of meaning while providing rich insights instead of striving to establish precise and all-encompassing principles that can be predicted and applied to all individuals irrespective of significant circumstances and elements (Alharahshel & Pius, 2020). In that regard, this study aligned with the interpretivist viewpoint regarding human nature, focusing particularly

on the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they ascribe to performance costumes.

The interpretive viewpoint argument asserts that individuals within a particular society hold diverse perspectives on reality and that their meanings and behaviour are influenced by their individual experiences (Alharahshel & Pius, 2020). Individuals who participate in performances may wear comparable clothing, but their experiences and interpretations will be unique due to the existence of multiple realities. As a result, interpretivism was applied as it also acknowledges and appreciates the unique perspectives and experiences of individuals within a particular social setting (Alharahshel & Pius, 2020). Most importantly, the interpretive approach aligned with the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) research design used in this study. The IPA explores how the process through which individuals get meaning from their personal and social environments (Smith & Osborn, (2007). Thus, IPA focuses on the interpretations the participants assign to certain experiences and events, including how the researcher, as an insider and authority, represents the emerging responses. Although the interpretive approach offers contextual richness and personal insights, it is subject to criticism concerning its limitations, validity, reliability, and generalisability. Consequently, to ascertain the accuracy and dependability, this research implemented the quality criteria by “bringing order, structure and meaning to the collected data” mentioned by Neuman (1997:426) and De and Vos (2002:197) in the methodology sections under chapter three.

6.1 DRESS CODES AS TOOLS FOR CULTURAL EXPRESSION

Under the contextual background and the rationale of this study, a plethora of examples were presented where cultural predispositions were highlighted to have a major impact in assigning meanings to clothing and within the everyday social material contexts. Various scenarios (Figures 1.1 to 1.4 and 1.9 to 1.11) where individuals in their choices of clothing arouse unexpected individual or group reactions from the material contexts were presented. It further postulated that different social material contexts (settings) react differently to everyday choice of clothing by individual social members due to either unjustifiable intolerant behaviour or scapegoating on the basis of indecent dressing as well as culturally perceived beliefs. This postulation was juxtaposed with scenarios where indecent dressing was tolerable when witnessed

among musicians (Figures 1.5 to 1.7) and trendsetters, as seen in Ama-2000 (Figures 1.9 to 1.11). These observations highlighted societal biases that are socially constructed and accepted; hence, the first question of this study was necessary to investigate the impact of clothes as elements of cultural expression. Additionally, when clothes and accessories are utilised in artistic practice, culturally constructed beliefs and norms influence the viewers' interpretation due to their perceived cultural knowledge. The study established that cultural predispositions affect the viewers' decoding of artistic messages where everyday clothing and accessories are utilised.

For example, Wezile Mgibe's performance, where he wrapped his head and face with a bandage and wore a female dress and earrings, would have been interpreted as being a woman if his name had not been disclosed and if the audience had not known the difference between isiXhosa (one of South African indigenous languages) gender names. The interpretation that he "is losing himself and might not be comfortable in the dress" was due to his chosen dress code, which is associated with females as it is culturally known and accepted as such.

The study also proved that prior knowledge of any kind regarding symbolism and semiotics utilised similarly influences the viewers' interpretation of the artwork. Prior knowledge includes knowing the artist and his/her work or the story or messages behind the work, sometimes leading to multiple interpretations. According to Alharahshel & Pius (2020), individuals within a particular society hold diverse perspectives on reality, and their meanings and behaviours are influenced by their individual experiences.

Furthermore, viewers' knowledge of any kind affects their reading of an artwork, similar to the reactions different clothing styles attract in different material contexts. Sometimes, this leads to the artworks being rendered controversial meanings, even though some artists thrive in sparking this kind of reaction deliberately to enforce needed change and for them (the artist) to learn from, towards excellence.

6.2 THE IMPACT OF COSTUMES AND ACCESSORIES ON PERFORMATIVE ART

In most social circumstances, clothing informs the spectators about the wearer and their social position and contributes to the creation of a personality. Any distinctive style of dress code of an individual or group usually reflects class, gender, profession, ethnicity, nationality, activity or even age. Clothing can be described as the visual culture of the people/wearers. When performance costumes and accessories are used in performance art, wearing them is an important part of the performer to get into the character before going on stage to perform. This is because wearing the performance costumes and accompanying accessories affects and transforms the performer's posture and how they should carry themselves in the actualisation of the intended character. In performance art, clothing or costumes inform the audience about a character, their social position, and personality and contribute to the creation of the entire message at play. Clothes in a performance encapsulate the intended character's personality to the audience, helping the performer to transform into the envisioned and believable character even though sometimes this could still be incomprehensible to the viewers.

On the question of whether "clothes and accessories relay similar messages and interpretations when used in an artistic expression as in social and cultural environments", the study found that when similar clothing is used in artistic enhancement or as expressive elements, they receive contrasting reactions mainly due to the social material contexts. This study, therefore, postulates that clothing as culturally constructed objects is interpreted differently when used in art, subverting socially unjustifiable intolerant behaviour as well as socially constructed biases. This confirms that clothing, as a powerful product of cultural construction, invokes different and controversial behaviours in everyday environments than in art, which is sometimes questionable. The study also seeks to caution against the need for modern society to rise above double standards, accept personal freedom and respect various individual freedoms of choices.

6.3 THE IMPACT OF PERFORMANCE ART ON SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Social commentary art has been used for centuries by many artists to express political beliefs, attack social ills and stereotypes, criticise war and poverty, and as activism for various societal concerns and issues, or to show how everyday people live and enjoy their lives, and more. This study has proffered that performance art on social commentary can be direct and literal, such as in the case of Carin Bester. Sometimes, it conveys figurative messages and meanings through symbols and semiotics, images, and stories, leaving the interpretation of the messages up to the readers or viewers. This was the case with most of the artists who were chosen as respondents or subjects of this study. Performance art presents real-life situations, especially when the performer uses a social material setting as his/her backdrop. Hence, the contents can be perceived to be more confrontational than other visual forms when used in social commentary. While most of the performances that were presented in this study were conveying figurative messages, they also provoked meaningful debates about the issues they were challenging and have somehow stirred up meaningful outcomes, especially for the artists to learn from.

Although performance artists may have been influenced by many factors in their lives and artistic practices, such as colonisation, ethnicity, cultural exchange, the environment, politics and migration, their messages still depict the culture of the people and everything happening in their immediate society. This study proffers that the artists' messages and meanings are usually accessible and more meaningful when they are created from their lived experiences.

Amongst the broader aims of engaging in performance art by artists are first to create awareness within the communities on issues often overlooked or ignored yet negatively impacting a certain portion of or the entire community. For example, Steven Cohen's brave move to stage his performance of *Chandelier* in a *squatter camp*, normally occupied by poor members of society and characterised by disparities and neglect, was challenging societal norms rooted in social injustices perpetuated by politically driven dispensations and actions.

It is true that Nandipha Mntambo's artwork titled *Enchantment* had a significant impact on culture and social practice by challenging traditional norms and perceptions surrounding gender, identity, and beauty. In her own words, the work explores themes of femininity, power, and transformation through the unconventional use of materials and the embodiment of half-human, half-animal figures. This artwork has been successful in influencing culture and social practice through its ability to spark meaningful conversations, challenge existing beliefs, and redefine societal norms. All these noble claims cannot be quantified since there has not been scientific research to measure their impact prior to and post-intervention. Therefore, they remain speculations, like aims and objectives without measurable outcomes.

6.4 AGENCY THROUGH SOCIAL COMMENTARY ART

Arts, in general, have been perceived by art practitioners as tools for social commentary and intervention, except only when they are done for entertainment and, or amusement, as art for art's sake. Thus, any kind of art is said to create agency primarily through its impact in affecting the spectators/viewers. Most of the performance examples engaged in this study were interventions commenting on social issues. Almost all of them aimed to create awareness, provoking interactions between members of society and challenging some norms and values, injustices, and stereotypical behaviours and attitudes. For example, Mntambo's work, *Enchantment*, is about challenging societal norms surrounding beauty. By using unconventional materials such as cowhide and incorporating elements of the animal kingdom into her artwork, Mntambo challenges traditional notions of beauty that are predominantly based on Eurocentric standards.

Akin to Mntambo's stance is Nontsikelelo "Lolo" Vekelo's artwork entitled *Sibu VIII and Phumeza* (Figures 2.5 and 2.6), respectively, which formed part of her *Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder* exhibition (Afronova Gallery, 2007) suggests that beauty is subjective and depends on individual perspective. This challenges societal norms and conventional standards of beauty, promoting a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what is considered beautiful instead of one-faced or, as cited above in Mntambo's works, the Eurocentric standards. Steven Cohen's choice of the squatter camp setting is made even more curious given his background of being gay and Jewish, thus juxtaposing and stressing this through his entire disposition, many

would consider his performance on the margins of this chosen society. Placing his performance (and thus himself) in this setting also draws attention to the apartheid government's forced removal of black people from developing and industrialised areas to environmentally impoverished ones and is made worse by the fact that this is still the case after the dawn of democracy. Even though Cohen's performance may have been ambiguous to the community that was used as the backdrop, it can be said that as a social commentary art, his intervention did stir up a necessary public response.

For the purposes of this study, agency through social commentary art was facilitated through clothing and dress codes due to the symbols and semiotics they carry with culturally imbued meaning. This was to investigate the impact of performative art that utilises clothing as culturally constructed elements to discover whether this improves the accessibility of the artwork meaningfully. The study suggests that these interventions had some kind of impact and were necessary, although there could be uncertainty regarding the impact of the intervention and the validity of the artists' claims. Sometimes artworks "provide only one line of enquiry and can lead" viewers "away from consideration of other relevant aesthetic responses. However, these are also useful to evoke cultural constructions of idealised values; idealisations of 'good' and 'bad', 'order' and 'disorder', perfection and human shortcomings" (Campbell 2001). The use of mundane symbols made this study's chosen artworks thought-provoking with diverse meanings (Campbell 2001:121-122).

Forge (1973) argued that the value of art lay primarily in its ability to communicate that which is not communicable in any other way.

Art communicates not only through elaborate symbolic systems but also through emotive stimuli. Although that which is communicated is not too difficult to discover, given exhaustive and detailed discussions with both the artist and audience, it is the emotive stimuli that are more elusive in an analysis of art (Campbell 2001:122).

Aesthetics is partly about how people feel or appreciate an artwork, its value to the viewers and how their feelings reflect wider sentiments towards meaningful agency. It can be concluded that art is produced within a social context by social actors with transformative objectives to the society as the artist's intention. Social commentary art, to be meaningful and effective, should not only evoke feelings and emotions but

must also suggest constructive solutions, especially if society is used as a backdrop. This can be done by implementing or promoting change that informs the public about a given problem and appealing to people's sense of justice through moderate coercive acts of empathy.

6.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is a bit difficult for this study to make a claim regarding the impact of Performance Art in social commentary due to the open-endedness of the interpretation of the viewers', it can be concluded that the emergent data has, to a certain extent, confirmed and provided answers to the importance of social commentary art in transforming societal mindsets on crucial matters, even though it (the transformation) might not be immediate.

It can be concluded, therefore, that the emergent data, to a certain extent, has confirmed this study's postulation that clothing in artistic expression plays an important role due to its culturally constructed meanings. These cultural constructions, in turn, influence the viewers' interpretations when reading the messages the artworks relay and sometimes lead to controversial judgments, especially in social commentary art. Performance costumes in art that comment on various societal concerns and issues sometimes present diversity and open-ended interpretation and meaning. The study, therefore, recommends a follow-up exercise aimed at measuring and validating the impact of agency through performance art as a means for social commentary towards social transformation. The recommended study should be underpinned by clear outcome-based objectives targeting the specific material contexts. Through this study, the exploration and understanding of the role of clothing/dress codes and accessories in performance arts, as well as the significance of performance art as a form of social commentary, confirmed the importance of art as an agency between the artists and their social environment. The impact of clothing in transforming society has been done and achieved, and all that is missing moving forward are tangible measurements of the assumptions and validations of inferences made in this study and others done before it.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFERENCES

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