

**TAPE/TALK: ACTS OF ENGAGEMENT**  
**ANNE ZANELE MUTEMA AND CHIEDZA PASIPANODYA**

*[Music swells: melancholic, mysterious, and trance-like. The sounds of sweeping, scratchy and rough.]*

**ANNE ZANELE MUTEMA [AZM]:** When I'm working, it's about me. And this continual search, this continual research, this continual work I'm doing to try and reconnect with my memories.

*[Music rescinds. Low notes linger and pulse in the background.]*

**CHIEDZA PASIPANODYA [CP]:** This is the 2022 Toronto Biennial of Art Podcast Series: "Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement".

My name is Chiedza Pasipanodya. I'm a Curatorial Fellow for the 2022 Toronto Biennial of Art.

Ngozi: We Might Listen for the Shimmerings is a curatorial project I developed across three Biennial sites. It features the work of Buhlebezwe Siwani, Timothy Yanick Hunter, and Anne Zanele Mutema, who I spoke to in March 2022 when she visited 72 Perth Avenue to install her work Systemic Necropolis.

*[Background sounds fade.]*

**AZM:** My name is Anne and I'm an artist and I'm a conceptual installation artist and also a sculptor. My work is about phenomenology and all the things that constitute an Event and the objects, the space, time, everything.

*[Punchy and whimsical piano number playing, quiets.]*

**CP:** Anne joined me at 72 Perth Avenue shortly after the Biennial opened on March 26. We sat in the back room of this older building, neither of us had spent much time in as of yet, steadily recounting shared stories of ritual and upbringing from Harare, Zimbabwe. We hear Shezad Dawood's "Leviathan: Episode 7" bellowing from just outside the door - the sound of the Sengeleses mangroves becoming familiar over the course of the recording.

Anne has been a practicing artist for over two decades, her work transforming to meet a point in time which coincided with my study of Shimmerings and phenomenology. In this conversation, she shared with me the deeper origins of her practice as they relate to her current work—how surrounding material and familial lineages played such a strong and present role. And, how the reclamation of memory through an Event is at the centre of it all.

*[Piano continues, then fades out.]*

**AZM:** I used to draw a lot. I used to like drawing a lot. Um, at that moment I didn't know, I didn't have any words to put to the feeling that I got from drawing—it was just this...excitement, this satisfaction. And I remember sitting on the lawn at my grandparents' place. And I'll just draw, you know, just look at pictures and copy them and draw.

*[Twittering birds]*

When I got to school, it was...I can't even explain it or describe it but...I was so happy knowing that there are people out there that actually do art and are called artists and I was like "yes!"

So we had all the subjects to do. Drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, assemblage and all and all and all. So I tried all those before, but there was not a deep connection when I was doing it. But when I was now doing assemblage, ah yeah yeah...that satisfaction and that happiness I got from drawing is like the same one that I get from assembling things, picking up things, picking up old things. I used to love old things. Like things that have been through a passage of time. And then, kind of telling stories simultaneously but it's telling its story and I'm also telling my story through that.

So I used to work with a lot of metal and wood—my early works. And stitching as well, with wire. So, that was like the most liberating feeling—when I'd be working with the metal—that I'd ever gotten for my journey, for that part of my journey.

***[Low melodic synthetic hum reverberating.]***

**CP:** Living and working in Harare, Zimbabwe, Anne has leaned into how traditional crafts and methods have furthered her work assemblage. She speaks of the "subjects she ran from in high school" becoming prevalent parts of her pieces. And how the rituals of matriarchal upbringings influenced her immensely. And again, the Event, a point in time that she captures—wrapped in plastic—with her work. The nature of the thing, the build-up to the embodied result, is introduced.

***[Hum fades to silence.]***

**AZM:** My mom used to sew. She's passed on now. She used to do a lot of sewing, like not full-time but she, you know, she would always be sewing something like some project curtains or something. And she had this book, it was like a compilation of different stitches that she had from high school because she did fashion, the one that I ran away from [laughs] in high school. So she had a compilation of different types of stitches and she used to love that book so much, you know one of those things that mothers always want to protect, exactly. Like "Don't touch that!" When you touch it like, "Did you put it back?" you know? So that was that book.

***[Gentle fluttering of paper or pages in a book being flipped.]***

Growing up, it was just you know "Ah that book that book". But I would look at it every now and again and I was like "Ah, interesting! Oh, you can actually do this with your hands!" you know? Because I thought that was complicated or you know fancy stitches were done by a machine or something.

That book at that time didn't mean anything to me, it was just another book. So a friend of mine borrowed the book and I took it and I gave it to him and I didn't ask my mom. So I then forgot about it, she passed on, and I was like "Ah, this book! I need to get the book back." I asked him, he lost the book!

***[Melodic chiming.]***

So I felt like if I had found it, it was going to be like her memory. Like not her memory per say, but like—

**CP:** The connection—

**AZM:** Exactly. Like a connection, an extension of her touch because she did those stitches using her hands.

**[Gentle lapping of waves.]**

So from there I did a work, it's called "Cislunar Lulu". They were like letters to my mom where I used a lot of stitching. So then I was trying to remember those stitches that I used to see in that book and then try to put them on the little—they were very little—tiny little pieces of cloth. Then I would try to then do—redo those stitches from the memory that I had from that book.

So from there, stitching before it was just like, I don't know how to say what it was but it was just something that gave me satisfaction you know like I wouldn't call my work complete before I stitched it. But from there it was like a realization that "Oh, I think stitching—because it was a cathartic process—that stitching is like a connection to the memory of my mom. So from there, the stitching has been like a very very very very important element in my work for me personally.

**[Low synthetic warbling sound erupts.]**

**CP:** Systemic Necropolis, which exhibited at 72 Perth is a mixed media work of mutsvairo, brooms, encased in plastic and red stitching. They hang, swaying lightly with the breeze, fans, and pulses of the space. Assembled in various shapes and sizes, Systemic Necropolis allows for immersion in what Anne is trying to share with us.

The mutsvairo is more than a household object but rather an artifact of Chivanhu, specifically Shona, culture as Anne explains further.

I asked her about her choice to use this object against the reclamation of her memories, and what it meant to her, personally.

**[Warbling fades to silence.]**

**AZM:** So the brooms, to me, I mean they are something that we're just so used to. That you don't even think about a broom anymore—

**CP:** In Zimbabwe.

**AZM:** In Zimbabwe, yes. So with the objects that I use for my work I re-use—I don't know if I can say common—but those objects that you can find in a house, like almost every Zimbabwean house has that object, so I use those objects and—for me—they have a lot of stories and a lot of memories, if I can say, imbued in them. And they are such time capsules. Like immensely.

So for this now, it was like an idea that I had over the years and then it just felt right—like I think I should do the work. The brooms work, now. So I bought some brooms and I collected some brooms from friends and familiar places. So for us in Zimbabwe, a broom is just something that every household has. [Crinkly sweeping sound arises.] Mutsvairo as you call it.

**[Punchy and whimsical piano number playing in the background.]**

The broom to us in our Shona culture it's like—it's something that's so...what can I say...something that we hold dear but at the same time, it's just...

**CP:** Everywhere.

**AZM:** Everywhere. Like it's nothing, but it's everything to us. So all the taboos and the dos and don'ts that surround the mutsvairo: don't hit someone with the mutsvairo, when you are sleeping you have to check if the is in the house—that's the thing that you must put in the house, mustn't sleep outside—and don't borrow someone's broom and don't give someone your broom, and, you, even when you put it in the house, just don't throw the broom, the mutsvairo. You place it nicely. And there's a way you must position it. Not like upside down with like the part that you hold on the floor. It has to be, up—

**CP:** A tail, almost.

**AZM:** Exactly, yeah. You know? So, looking at Systemic Necropolis I was then not playing per say but juxtaposing the broom. Taking those dos and don'ts and then changing them.

The mutsvairo accumulates a lot of things. Dirt...hair...you name it. It's collected in there. So for me, the mutsvairo was now a time capsule where all those memories, all those collections are kept.

When I'm working, it's about me. And this continual search, this continual research, this continual work I'm doing to try and reconnect with my memories.

**[Music wells with melodic synthetic hum.]**

**CP:** Phenomenology can often be described as the study of phenomena; how things appear, how we experience them, and the meaning of those experiences.

Theorist Roland Barthes reinvigorates and reapplies phenomenology to photography through the term and phenomenon of "shimmering". Shimmering is an aspect or entity whose meaning is, perhaps, subtly modified according to the angle of the subject's gaze.

In Anne's work to reconnect with these memories, we spoke about her curiosity towards phenomenology and the way she approached it and interpreted memory through this lens of inquiry.

**AZM:** We don't pause as much as we ought to or as much as we would like. Cause things are just happening, you know? Things are just happening. People have memories of something if A: it was sad, B: it was like a very good one. And then there are a lot of things that then trigger or ring that memory back.

So for me, it was looking at all that and saying "Oh, okay. We have mem—like, everyone has memories." Be bad, good, some are now shamed, some are very vivid, some are vague—And I was looking at all that, and the relevance of memory to me.

Then I saw that there was this deep connection with memory and I had so much to say, and I still have so much to say about memory. You know, like, day by day I'm discovering something. And it's becoming more intriguing for me. it's

actually something that is very dear to me. And I can't even explain it. Memory and phenomenology—and now, I'm bordering between phenomenology: what we know, and the ethereal: what we think we know or what we want to know and what we know and don't know that we know.

***[Music wells with melodic synthetic hum.]***

**CP:** Anne's work to uncover memories is ongoing, as she explores assemblage further as the medium of her work. As she's mentioned, discovering new materials or picking up old things are all welcomed elements as she moves forward. Even after we had our conversation and left the building, walking down Perth together, she gathered gravel and rock remnants from the construction site nearby. Determined to, even then, encase the memory and recount her time here.

Art, specifically assemblage, holds power in repurposing and encasing. In the non-physical and intangible, memory offers a similar power while conjuring new associations for both the artist and the audience.

Systemic Necropolis is an exercise in this.

***[Musical chanting rises then fades into the sound of lapping waves.]***

**TBA:** Thank you for tuning into this episode of Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement. To learn more about the artists, works, and sites mentioned in this episode, and to access a transcript, visit [torontobiennial.org](http://torontobiennial.org).

Tape/Talk: Acts of Engagement was produced for the Toronto Biennial of Art by Roxanne Fernandes in collaboration with Katie Jensen and Ren Bangert of Vocal Fry Studios. Music is by Rosina Kazi and Nicolas Murray of LAL.

***[Musical chanting and sounds fade.]***