

# Airing South Africa's dirty laundry

Artists will hang 3 600 used panties on a washing line, the estimated number of women raped daily

BODY LANGUAGE  
Nondumiso Msimanga

As part of an upcoming exhibition and installation, other artists and I will string up thousands of pairs of used underwear in the streets of Maboneng, Johannesburg. And after that, I'm putting on a wedding dress made of panties.

The point? To start a very public and very open dialogue during 16 Days of Activism, a dialogue about what rape in South Africa looks like. This is the sort of difficult-to-ignore discussion that will attempt to connect to the greater narrative of South Africa through art.

Jenny Nijenhuis and I met in one of those ways that artists and Jungians call *synchronicity*. I was working on a dance piece after winning my first award and she was working on her first solo exhibition. Even though we are both artists, we had both been doing other work to pay the bills. Nijenhuis had a long career in marketing and I was teaching full time and writing about the arts for a local magazine. We both knew this was not enough.

We met at the gallery where she was meticulously setting up her show. Titled *Masters of Misdirection*, it characterised the complex relationships between people and the relationships people have with themselves. When I saw the works, I felt tears well up in my eyes.

They were telling a story I knew — a story I was telling in my own work. Nijenhuis and I spoke about her work, about mythology and arche-



**On the line: People Opposing Women Abuse and other organisations have joined artist Jenny Nijenhuis (right) and Nondumiso Msimanga in their 'artivism' event. Photo: Zeno Petersen**

types, and how people gain access to ways of being through the collective unconscious. We spoke about the path towards artistic freedom and about freedom itself.

Freedom, for Jenny, was a false myth. It had been denied her as a young girl when she was sexually assaulted. It would be months later that, suddenly, during a rehearsal, I remembered the event of my molestation as a six-year-old. My art had forced me to look into my own fear-stricken eyes and see my six-year-old self so I could remember my freedom to choose a different life.

But, before I left the gallery that day, I knew we would work together to bring our stories, and stories like ours, together. I had no idea how, until she emailed me a year later. She, too, felt that we had something to say, together.

The show we are working on, *South Africa's Dirty Laundry*, began with conversations — between us and other women expressing the need to make art to help us cope with the feeling of an inability to deal with life and interactions with others. These stories were seeking the light. The narrative needed to be shared.

It was in this attempt to counteract the historical silence on issues of rape that we found the inspiration to produce art, not for the sake of commodity or reward, but to be gifted, to be shared.

When Jenny emailed me again, she was doing research on rape and I was doing research on rape trauma syndrome. We were distressed by the deluge of stories we were reading, particularly those about rapes gone unpunished. Perpetrators rarely faced the law. With experts on

rape in South Africa confounded by muddled reporting systems, which make the incidents difficult to quantify, one statistic starkly stared back at us. A 2010 study by the Medical Research Council found that just one in 25 in Gauteng even reported rape. Extrapolated from figures at the time, it could have meant that up to 3 600 people in South Africa were raped every day. We were one of South Africa's horrific statistics.

Jenny's installation will place 3 600 pieces of used underwear on washing lines across the streets of Maboneng, ending at SoMa Art + Space, where I will perform *On the Line*, a meditation in a wedding dress made of panties, outside SoMa.

Along with the installation, various "artivism" events will take place in the streets of the precinct from November 25 to December 4 and an open call has been put out to other artists who want to share their stories of rape through different artistic forms, culminating in an exhibition at SoMa, *The Things We Do For Love*.

Since we embarked on the project, the response from women — donating their used panties and their stories of sexual abuse — and civil society has been overwhelming.

Taking part in the project are People Opposing Women Abuse, the Gender Equity Office, Drama for Life, Big Fish School of Filmmaking, the Maboneng Precinct, Amnesty International, Women for Afrika, I Love Westdene, Jozi Real Food Market, the *Mail & Guardian*, and more. We hope that exposing South Africa's dirty laundry through art will help to shift the status quo.

For more about underwear donation or the call to artists, go to [pantiesplea.co.za](http://pantiesplea.co.za). The curators are also asking for new underwear to be given to rape crisis organisations for survivor care packs. For more about SoMa Art + Space, go to [somaartspace.co.za](http://somaartspace.co.za)