

Social Impact Arts Prize '22

Waste collectors for home to place a call to E'Plazini. a place to call

Through Buthelezi's lens, E'Plazini tells a story of the daily lives of this community and the difficult and often dangerous work that sustains them. While this story is one of hardship and endurance, it is also one that recognises the intimacies and personal histories of its subjects. Buthelezi's documentary series foregrounds personhood and entrepreneurial spirit within the informal recycling sector, with the aim of drawing attention to the contribution made by individuals towards climate resilience and the economy of South Africa.

Informal waste collectors - also referred to as 'reclaimers' and colloquially as 'waste pickers' make a living by collecting, sorting and selling recyclable materials to private companies within the waste management industry. Paid by the kilogram, fees for recyclables are unregulated and differ between companies but from Buthelezi's interactions at Dryhook, he estimates that reclaimers make around R40 a day or R200 a week. Reclaimers travel long distances on foot, using trolleys made from materials such as wooden palettes and parts of ironing boards to carry waste. Those who collect, sort and transport waste work long hours, sometimes seven days a week. Their labour is time-intensive, physically gruelling and involves material that is often hazardous.

Statistics around informal recycling vary dramatically with the estimated number of active reclaimers in South Africa ranging from 60 000 - 215 000. This sprawling estimate is indicative of the lack of recognition reclaimers receive for their work from the public and private sector as well as a consequence of their 'invisibility' within society. The 'blind spot' into which the work of reclaimers falls is convenient for the authorities and society which draws financial and environmental benefit from their services, free of charge. In addition to this, many reclaimers are from Lesotho and countries bordering South Africa and, or, are undocumented. As such, their 'invisibility' may protect them from deportation and xenophobia, while leaving them entirely exposed to the dangerous conditions in which they work.

Buthelezi's interest in documenting the lives and work of informal recyclers extends into a broader conversation around the future of work, which "...place[s] emphasis on automation and artificial intelligence as solutions - with the promise of more time for leisure and 'higher order thinking'. Very few of these conversations are centred on the poor and those who contribute and create a livelihood through the informal sector. The politics of labour and leisure are inextricably linked to the capitalist system that produces and perpetuates poverty - the same system used to oppress and exclude millions of citizens from participating in the fruits of a productive nation."

The system of salvaging disposed recyclables that constitutes the informal recycling sector in South Africa is referred to as 'separation outside source'. Contrary to the perception of informal waste collection as a marginal practice, the work of reclaimers is deeply integrated into the recycling value chain and accounts for higher recycling levels than in countries that rely on consumers to separate waste. With pressure from developed countries to introduce climate protocols globally in spite of historical and current dependence on the developed world for resources and dumping space, South Africa's informal recycling industry presents a unique argument for a nuanced solution to environmental challenges. 'E'Plazini: A Place to Call Home for Waste Collectors' asks how perceptions around work can be shifted in order to support, recognise and more appropriately remunerate individuals on the front line of climate resilience.

Bertrand Russell describes work as having two forms: the first involves the moving of objects over the surface of the earth. The second involves instructing others to move objects over the surface of the earth. In South Africa, informal recyclers divert up to 24 tonnes of recyclable waste from landfills each year by pulling makeshift trolleys across harsh urban landscapes. If work is composed of the movement of objects over the surface of the earth, a better example would be hard to find, though the inherent virtue of informal recyclers' work defies Russell's intentionally reductive definition.

'E'Plazini: A Place to Call Home for South Africa's Waste Collectors', a project by Johannesburg-based photographer Mpumi Buthelezi, asks questions about the nature of work in relation to informal waste collection: "What counts as work? What is 'important' work, and who is dignified through that work?"

The project developed when Buthelezi got to know Gladman Mazibuko, an informal recycler whose work takes him through Buthelezi's neighbourhood in Soweto, where they occasionally play soccer together. What began as a series of conversations between the two about their work and lives, grew into a friendship. In time, Buthelezi visited Dryhook, a settlement near the Devland landfill where Mazibuko lives as part of a community of recyclers. Through this process, Buthelezi overcame many of his own fears and misinterpretations around informal recycling work and felt compelled to communicate his experiences with a broader audience.



