

The Necessity of a National Art for Liberation - Dikobe

Firstly, even though we are all artists or cultural workers, it is evident that we have different interpretations of Art, which determine our understanding of the role of Art in relation to social, political, and economic questions.

There are artists who believe in what may be termed "Art for Art's sake"; that is, that Art does not and should not serve any social purpose; that frequently art has no reference to anything outside itself, and that it is expressive of the vision of the individual artist if of anything. The accompanying, critical doctrine is that any criticism of this art form in terms other than these stated, is an importation of "irrelevant values". A work of art or poem, it is believed, should not "mean" but "be".

There are artists, on the other hand, who believe that the production of art is in fact a social activity determined by the existing social relations. True art, be it visual art, writing or music, should be a cognition process rather than be a transferal of skills and technique.

Our culture under apartheid is a contested culture.

A culture afflicted by oppression and exploitation.

A culture of people dying daily of malnutrition and starvation in reserves now called resettlement camps and at times homelands.

A culture of black children being shot by policemen and of adults dying of unknown 'natural causes' in detention.

What is our response as cultural workers to this situation? Do we conveniently shut our eyes and minds to such brutality and ~~continue business~~ as usual?
Continue business

The ethical responsibility expected of an artist by society cannot be dispelled in the interests of "artistic neutrality" and "art for art's sake", in a society where the ruling minority class rules by intimidation, detention, and guns. There is a point at which "artistic neutrality" becomes a tool of the status quo by virtue of its silence in the face of injustice.

Artists have to commit themselves more meaningfully to the struggle in South Africa and be prepared to run into conflict with the accepted norms of the oppressor culture. They cannot shun their historical role of cultural reconstruction. Artists by their very nature and pre-occupation are people who are supposed to have their eyes determinantly fixed on the future.

It thus becomes important for us as cultural workers to distinguish between artistic practice (the production of visual art) and political practice (engagement in political activity), and the relations between them. For there is full responsibility where there is full awareness.

Political practice has as its object the social relations of a society upon which it acts in order to transform it. Political practice is guided by a party's political and revolutionary

theory. The party is also responsible for a political programme, strategies and tactics which are drawn from the experience of active struggle. Political practise raises political and economic demands, its strategic aim being the seizure of state power and the transformation of social relations.

Art practice shares with political practise, as their object, a critical ideology. Certain incorrect positions are held by artists as a result of confusion between art-practise and political practice.

Some artists hold the position that "my art is my politics and my contribution towards changing society is my art-practice". This position, is partly a result of the complete separation between Art practise and political practice. This stand often leads the artists to with hold him/herself from political practice.

Another position is that "I participate in political practice and that is my contribution to changing society. My art is my work as an artist." This position ignores the ideology embodied within artistic products. It is also a result of separation between artistic practice and political practice.

Finally there are artists who are primarily concerned with commercialism to satisfy consumer needs. This is evidenced by the way 'critics' love to praise artists by the number of exhibitions held rather than by the quality of the work produced.

We thus note that Art practice cannot be effective without political practice. Because visual art works are at best passive reflections of the good and bad in society, art works by themselves do not give people ~~the organisational skills~~ tools that would enable them to make use of opportunities offered by political life itself, in order to change an unjust, racist and minority ruled society.

Our failure as artists has been recognised. The fact that there still exist no more than a handful of visual artists working in South Africa right now whose work can be SEEN to be explicitly socially critical bears testimony that we have been "playing it safe" for far too long.

The task of a vital South African art practice demands of us, to confront the reality of 'Total Strategy' with a response that holds artistic, social and political meaning. Artists will have to face up to and challenge the prevailing power structure, by raising the levels of consciousness, by expanding the boundaries of visual and conceptual experience.

This is one ^{function of the creative} ~~function of the creative~~ imagination, amongst others, and in this lies a unique power, the power to pose alternatives and ~~to induce people to think~~ ~~the power to pose alternatives and to induce people to think,~~

the power to combat the specific form that cultural apartheid takes within the sphere of artistic production and in cultural apartheid in general

to look at the dominant ideology of the ruling class critically and expose its real function, that of exploitation, discrimination and oppression, and thereby assist the people's struggle.

~~Both tasks are interrelated. The need~~

Both tasks are interrelated. The need for the development of a national art becomes self-evident.

The artist then has to become part of the vanguard, not only in the political sense but also in the realm of his specific art practice. It should be clear now that the artist cannot content him/herself with art practice only, for it can never be a substitute for political practice, for it is impossible to make a revolution with drawings, paintings and sculptures only, no matter how progressive they may be.

But times are changing.

We have the manpower, skills and the makings of a revolutionary culture, that stands for truth, opposes injustice, and poses alternatives. We are not saying that this is a revolutionary culture yet-- you don't get a revolutionary culture until you get a revolution. But something is happening back home.

An important observation is that this culture is in many instances the product of collective effort rather than individualism. In the recent past we have seen music groups and theatre units join hands with workers during industrial boycotts to assist the worker struggle artistically and financially. We also know of art units who have produced posters, pamphlets and T/shirts to commemorate and celebrate people's heroes and important days in the history of our struggle. Art units are also contributing their skills during demonstrations.

All of these acts are forms of creativity that are social and shared.

Secondly, many of these cultural forms are becoming more and more participatory. Theatre is demanding audience participation and response. Poetry readings and book discussions are becoming popular. Musicians are also making music for the mind--- and feet of course.

Cultural workers are thus beginning to work with other workers under the unifying banner, "An injury to one, is an injury to all".

Any breakdown of the division of labour in the arts and industry seems to be a hopeful sign of our growing ability to integrate different kinds of experience for our common good.

Our art must become a process-- a living, growing thing that people can relate to, identify with, be part of, understand and not be a mysterious world a universe apart from them.

As politics must teach people the ways and give them the means to take control over their own lives, art must teach people, in the most vivid and imaginative ways possible, how to take control over their own experience and observations, now to link these with the struggle for liberation and a just society free of race, class and exploitation.

5 July, 1982

Appendix:

In 1935 the communist poet Bertold Brecht wrote an essay entitled "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties". In it he states:

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"Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when the truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognise it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the cunning to spread it amongst the people; and the judgement to select those/whose hands it will be effective. These are formidable problems for a writer living under Facism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or have been exiled; they exist even for writers working in countries where civil liberties prevail."

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