

JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

THAMI MNYELE
+ MEDU

ART ENSEMBLE RETROSPECTIVE

30.11.2008
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7.1.4

To be young, gifted and black...

was one of Thami Mnyele's favourite
Nina Simone songs.

Strains of Simone and other American jazz greats like John Coltrane were often heard on the streets of Alexandra township, along with local composers such as saxophonists Zakes Nkosi and Ntemi Piliso. Life could be brutal in Alex, but people loved the township's musicians for expressing their joy, their pain and their anger.

'It was a place of tumultuous energy and indiscriminate violence,' writes Diana Wylie in her biography* on Thami's life and his art. 'At close quarters and on a daily basis he saw the best and the worst of what people can do to one another...

'But Alexandra also inspired him to feel tenderness for what in many people's mouths was merely a slogan; *the people*.

* Wylie, D. (2008) *Art and Revolution: The Life and Death of Thami Mnyele, South African artist*. Johannesburg. Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd.



Thami Mnyele, detail of a drawing for a poster design as insert to a Medu newsletter.

HOME IN ALEX

Thami was born in 1948, seven months after the National Party came to power in South Africa. Within five years, the ruling party enforced its new policy of *apartheid*: large scale social engineering was presented as *separate development* for South Africa's *variety of peoples*. Alexandra made up about two and a half square kilometres of the urban apartheid grid in northern Johannesburg at the time. Its poverty was at odds with the affluence of its neighbouring white suburbs. Thami spent his early years with his mother, Sarah Mamanyena Thamane, and siblings at number 9 Sixth Avenue. They lived in three rooms behind the main house owned by his late grandfather, Peter Jobere Thamane. In the overcrowded Alex of the time they were privileged to be related to the people living in the main house: his grandmother, Pauline Makgobe, and several aunts and uncles. Longtime resident Simon 'Jika' Twala remarked: 'If you were born in Alex into a yard holding 20 families who had one tap and one toilet, politics was part of your life; you were a politician.'

A mood of resistance developed in Alex during the forties and fifties. In 1950, and again two years later, workers protested unjust laws with stay-away campaigns, discovering their strength in numbers. In 1955 a mass meeting in Kliptown, southwest of Johannesburg, endorsed a new bill of rights for South Africa, named the Freedom Charter. South African Communist Party (SACP) member Rusty Bernstein, who drafted the Freedom Charter after a consultative process countrywide, described the African National Congress (ANC) of the time as 'a mass frame of mind rather than a modern political body'. Sarah might have disagreed. She chose to join the ANC in 1955 and by the next year she was a marshal helping to organize a historic women's march to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, protesting against the extension of pass laws to women. She was not impressed with her husband's response to the times; what she called his 'escape into the sheltered world of the church'.

Thami briefly shared a home with his father. David Freddy Harry Mnyele, a mining clerk with New Union Goldfields, left two years after his son's birth to prepare for the ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME church was a Protestant sect originally founded in America to protest slavery. Christened Thamsanqa Harry Mnyele, Thami's second name came from his paternal grandfather, Harry Mnyele. Both Harry and his wife, Elizabeth, served as stewards in the AME church in Heilbron in the then Orange Free State, where her family owned farm land. The church focused particularly on voicing protest against the pass laws which denied black South Africans freedom of movement. When Harry senior was tragically struck down by lightning while working in his fields, his widow moved with her children to Sophiatown - the other Johannesburg township, besides Alex, where blacks could own their plots. More than one generation on both sides of Thami's family owned their homes. But they would soon lose this right, as the government enmeshed all black South Africans in a complexity of legislation primarily aimed at removing *black spots* from *white areas*.

The true home of a black South African, the Nationalist government decreed, lay in the rural *homeland areas* it was establishing. Each *homeland* was defined in terms of a single African *language group* and encouraged to develop its own brand of nationalism, based on the *unique cultural heritage* of its inhabitants. When Thami was eight years old, Sarah decided to send her children to live with a relative in a rural area north of Pretoria. Incessant apartheid legislation made life in the township uncertain and she was afraid the *Msomis* (township gangs) would harm her boys, or try to recruit them. Sarah found full-time employment as a domestic worker in the Johannesburg suburb of Parkhurst and Thami saw her at most once every two months for years to come.



Alexandra Township photographed in the 1930s, when its population numbered approximately 10 000 people. Within 10 years this number would double and increase dramatically thereafter. Photo © Museum Africa

EXPERIENCING THE HOMELAND

Ironically, according to apartheid geography, Thami was now *well placed* in what was to become Boputhatswana, because his mother spoke Tswana and Ndebele (Ndebele speakers were last in line to be allocated a homeland). But his maternal heritage, combined with a Xhosa-speaking father and urban township origins, would have confounded apartheid's architect, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. The National Bantu Education policy determined that Thami's education focused on manual skills; intellectual excellence and creativity was not desired from the future black labour force. He liked to draw, but in Makapanstad there was no one to encourage him. As an adolescent Thami felt misplaced in a bleak rural landscape. He missed the stimulation of life on the streets of Alexandra, especially when he heard of dramatic political events at home. He was an urban exile; things seemed to be happening elsewhere.

In 1955 Thami's grandmother, Elizabeth Mnyele, was forcibly removed from her Sophiatown property along with 70 000 other residents to Meadowlands in the vast Soweto township, south west of Johannesburg. In 1959 the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) split from the ANC; its members were not in favour of collaboration with liberal whites. The PAC's national anti-pass campaign encouraged people to burn their passbooks. The ANC and the SACP held night meetings in Makapanstad, where land disputes increased as more and more people arrived who could not find employment in the city.

In 1960 the South African political landscape was shaken to the core when, during a PAC-organized mass demonstration at Sharpeville police station, about two hours' drive from Makapanstad, the police opened fire and 69 unarmed protesters were killed. Media coverage of the event spread like wildfire all over the world. Soon after the South African government detained some 2000 activists and declared a state of emergency. Townships were now under the control of the police and the army. In April 1960 the ANC and the PAC were banned and leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo went into hiding. The following year, when South Africa became a republic, plans for mass action were suppressed by a show of military force. Now almost 10 000 activists were detained. ANC leader Nelson Mandela declared on foreign television: 'If the government reaction is to crush by naked force our non-violent struggle, we will have to seriously reconsider our tactics.' The ANC leadership formed a separate military organisation known as Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), popularly known as MK. Thami was 13 when MK detonated its first bombs at government offices. MK and the state entered into a dialogue of covert violence that would last for decades. SACP member Rusty Bernstein believed operation Mayibuye, a document in which the campaign of sabotage was developed into a strategy of guerrilla warfare, revealed 'a wholly inadequate analysis of the real balance of power in the country'. He felt that military thinking 'ignored the human factors of consciousness, morale and ideas'.

* Bernstein, R. (1999) *Memory against forgetting*, p251-2. London (Viking)

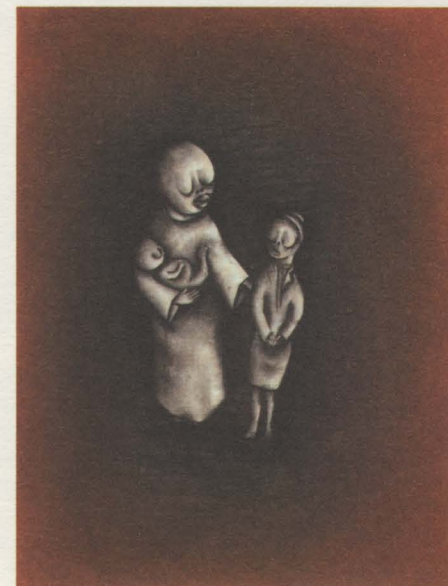
WANDERING THE CITY

Thami Mnyele is described by all who knew him as a quiet person; introspective and a man of few words, but highly perceptive and sensitive to his surroundings. According to apartheid philosophy, for a black boy to grow up within the *authentic* cultural context of a rural homeland would be a positive experience. But Thami was experiencing an extreme sense of alienation. In 1965 he dropped out of school before his final exam, suffering from 'acute feelings of failure'. He fell in love with a beautiful fellow student, Matsopo. Like Thami, Matsopo loved the *avant garde* jazz sounds of local musician Dollar Brand (later known as Abdullah Ibrahim) and the American vocalist Nina Simone, both artists with an awareness of social concerns. When Matsopo gave birth to Thami's baby daughter, he was in no position to assume the responsibility of a father.

* Mnyele, T. *Observations*

Thami and his elder sister Julie returned to Alexandra and moved into a house rented by their uncle David, two plots away from their old home on Sixth Avenue. But the township they returned to was very different to the place of resilient optimism it had been in the 1950s. In the 1960s public protest was silenced by state repression. Jika Twala said Alex was 'like Siberia'. People did not discuss politics, because they were afraid of being overheard and arrested. The ANC and PAC, both banned, recruited few members at this time. Thami's only recourse was family. He spent time with his father, now at the AME church in Soweto, and got to know his half brothers and sisters. His sister Julie, only two years older than himself, had always taken care of Thami when their mother was not able to. Now she fell in love with a glamorous township jazz musician and moved in with him. Within four months Julie was pregnant and in despair at her partner's infidelity. Tragically, she sustained serious burns when her primus stove exploded. Thami was shocked when he saw Julie in hospital, so badly injured that she was hardly recognisable. When she passed away two months later, he referred to her death as 'a suicide'. The memory of her mutilated body and exposed bones would appear in Thami's art again and again. Julie was buried on top of her grandmother's coffin in the overcrowded Alexandra graveyard.

The words *to be young, gifted and black* resonate with particular irony in terms of Thami's life at this time. He was certainly not without ambition, but he seems to have wandered about within a personal labyrinth which wound its way through Johannesburg, Alexandra and Soweto. He spent three years without any steady employment. But considered within his political context in the late sixties and early seventies, Thami's personal state of alienation was by no means unique. Existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre wrote at the time that the oppressed experience the circumstances of their repression as their own lives: 'The exploited experience exploitation as their reality.'



One of Thami's early symbolic works: *Untitled*, 1972, pastel, 82.5 x 57.5 cm, from the Collection of David and Josie Adler.

WALLY SEROTE AND NEW CONNECTIONS

Thami always found solace in music, and in this he was part of a culture of jazz connoisseurs in Alexandra. 'On weekends people would dress up, draw chairs around a battery-driven gramophone in the middle of the yard and spend hours passing shrewd comments on the sounds of the jazz greats. They competed to see who could build the best record collection, bragging about who owned the latest disc by John Coltrane or Charlie Parker.' *

*Wylie, D.p.31.

Cultural trends and ideas of black liberation from the United States resonated in South Africa's townships in the 1960s. Some fashions, such as Afro hairstyles, were slavishly copied. Others were appropriated and reinterpreted in terms of local needs. Local saxophonist Winston Mankunku Ngozi recorded his *Yakhal' Inkomo* (meaning *the cry of the cattle at the slaughterhouse*) in response to Coltrane's style. His composition, in turn, inspired the title of a book of poetry, which was to help establish Thami as an artist.

It all came about one day when Thami was crossing a yard on Second Avenue to visit Jika Twala and heard some Coltrane coming from a room nearby. When he noticed Thami listening, the Coltrane fan, James Bokwe Mafuna, asked what he liked to do. * Thami replied 'to draw'. As news photographer for the *Rand Daily Mail's* 'black' edition, Bokwe knew the members of the township's artistic elite, who often socialised in his kitchen. He decided to introduce Thami to a young writer called Mongane Wally Serote.

* Wylie, D. interview with Bokwe.

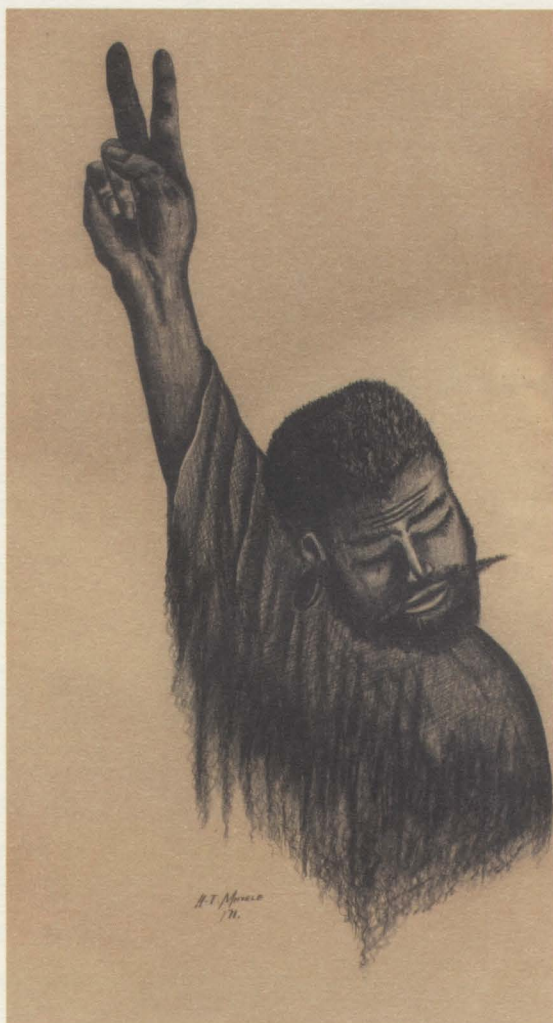
It was a most successful connection. Thami showed Wally one of his early drawings; a symbolic image of a fat pig titled *The Prodigal Son*. They became friends and through Wally, Thami met a range of *avant garde* artists both in the townships and the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Thami was rediscovering the township and the city, and mapping a new direction for himself in the process. Wally would later remark that during this period he himself was living 'in the twilight, belonging neither fully to the white suburbs nor Alex'.*

*Serote S. Autobiographical essay dated Jan 1995, MCH 115, Mayibuye Centre, University of the Western Cape.

It was through his friendship with author Nadine Gordimer in the small alternative literary circle of Johannesburg that Wally Serote was introduced to the work of West African writers such as Leopold Senghor and Wole Soyinka. In 1966 the South African government banned the work of most African writers. Gordimer co-edited a 1969 issue of *The Classic* literary magazine in which Serote's first published work, a poem titled *Cat and Bird* appeared. He also became the only black writer attending Lionel Abrahams' writing workshop. When an anthology of Wally's poems was to be published, he chose the title *Yakhal' Inkomo*. Wally asked Thami to design the cover. In a symbolic style typical of his early work, Thami drew a pregnant figure with a baby on her back. The mother's long neck and bowed head speaks of a heavy burden. Yet the forms are evocatively stylized and the figures do not seem fully human. One of the stories Wally had written, *When Rebecca Fell*, told the story of Dumile Feni, a major South African artist at the time. Thami never met Dumile before he left the country in 1967 (deliberately throwing away his passport, the story goes), but in Dumile's direct expression of the emotional life of his people, Thami felt he had found an artist whose work spoke to him directly.

Wally Serote's writing displayed a gift for metaphor. He commented on South African society without making direct reference to politics, which was too dangerous within the repressive South African state, though he communicated his values clearly in his respect for the simple things people do every day. Wally was arrested more than once for pass offences, and endured nine months of solitary confinement in 1969. The security police even tried to make an informer of him. He never learnt what the charge was against him.

In 1971 Thami made a charcoal drawing of a man thrusting up one arm, gesturing a V sign. In this drawing Thami was departing from symbolic form and representing human vulnerability directly. The man's physical gesture, signaling victory, is at odds with the tentative slant of his head; like the tenuous stirrings of a new consciousness.



Untitled, 1971, conté on paper, 85 x 45 cm, from the Collection of Ike Ramothibe.



The best of our kind..., 1974, mixed media on paper, 52.3 x 37.9 cm, Courtesy of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality Collection, donated by Rhona Segale Ogbugo.



Brotherhood on Ninth Avenue, 1974, mixed media on paper, 50 x 41.2 cm, from the Collection of Judy Seidman.

FIRST FRUITS: MIHLOTI AND MDALI

In the same year Thami met musician Molefe Pheto, who had just returned from studying music in London. Molefe was working as cultural programme director for the African Music and Drama Association at Dorkay House, in downtown Johannesburg. Wally approached Molefe with the idea of founding a theatre group that would work toward a liberatory art form for their people. The idea was to use the theatre not to say 'oppress us kindly' but 'get off our backs', Molefe later relayed in an interview. * They founded a black theatre group called Mihloti (which means 'tears' in Xitsonga). The next year they expanded the concept by founding Mdali (the Music, Drama, Arts and Literature Institute), which drew its performers from beyond Alexandra. Mihloti and Mdali flourished; they performed widely in townships, drawing large audiences. Thami remembered when he first acted the part of the American civil rights leader Malcolm X: 'Suddenly I was experiencing a surge of internal satisfaction. Theatre gave me the feelings of purpose and practical fulfillment. The actual engagement of the physical, standing there and towering over the little crowd of people in my township, seated, silent but nodding their heads occasionally when I had made another good point... The act of theatrical performance is more immediate than making pictures, I thought. Here one is surrounded by the community, alive, blood and sweat and flesh. Set free from the loneliness and aloneness of paintings and confinement'.

* *Mihloti black theatre*, Medu newsletter, volume 1, number 2 (June 1979) p. 41-6.

Thami was beginning to discover the joys of being *young, gifted and black*. He was often part of a gathering in a room on Fifteenth Avenue where ideas were discussed intensely: Maoism, Existentialism and Marxism. The group called themselves 'the intellectuals'. The room belonged to Wally's friend Masindi Radley. Sindy's medical student friend in Durban, Mamphele Ramphele, had introduced her in 1968 to her boyfriend, fellow student Steve Biko. Biko motivated the black youth by establishing SASO, the South African Students' Organisation, as an alternative to NUSAS, the National Union of South African Students, which he believed was dominated by white liberals to the exclusion of the interests of black students. Biko spearheaded the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa, and is remembered for his keen understanding and his articulation of the psychological effect of political oppression on black youth.

The basic tenet of Black Consciousness, as quoted on the back cover of SASO newsletter 5.1 (Mayibuye 1975) reads: 'The Black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.' BCM was attempting to address the personal alienation experienced by blacks in their own country; the kind of alienation Thami understood too well.

SASO invited Mihloti and Mdali to perform at their rallies. 'We tell people to stop moaning and to wake up and start doing something about their valuable and beautiful black lives,' Mafika Gwala heard a Mihloti spokesperson say. *

* Gwala, M.P. *Black Review*. 1973. Durban BCP Publications, April 1974.



Remember me... I am going... Time calls me..., 1974, wax crayon, conte, ink on paper, 118.5 x 94 cm, from the Collection of David and Josie Adler.

In 1973 Thami left Alex to study visual art at Rorke's Drift in KwaZulu-Natal. He learnt a range of graphic techniques, woodcut and lino. But he was disappointed to discover that: 'Technique was the core of art discussion and learning... due to the government's suspicion and hostility to the expatriate missionary community. The art teacher clearly avoided discussion on the content in a work of art'. Thami left Rorke's Drift before completing his course.

He also regarded the well-established commercial art world of Johannesburg with suspicion: 'Most art galleries would impress it upon any African painter that he should paint mainly township scenes... what was fundamentally an anguished outpouring of revolt against such life, against such a system, by any artist who suffered so much, was betrayed. It was reduced to sentimental caricatures of a primitive community of people, who were satisfied with their way of life'. The boy who had been sent to school in a *homeland area*, another fiction built on a simplistic perception of a *primitive community of people satisfied with their way of life*, was reclaiming his home in his political choices. 'It is the tastes and wants of these business institutions and critics that decide which work will be exhibited and bought; and which cultural worker will be regarded as a success. (This contributes to) the element of alienation of the artist from the community,' he wrote in his *Observations*.



Come to my home and join us on our journey, 1973, linocut on paper, 74 x 43.4 cm, Held in custodianship at the Caversham Press.

'We had very good artists like Dumile (Feni), (Ezrom) Legae and others,' he later told Tim Williams. 'I knew these people because I was going into town to galleries and looking into works there. But I found where they lived with their people, they were not known at all... I made a resolution that I am not going to exhibit in a gallery.' *

*Williams, T. (1980) Interview with Thami Mnyele in Medu newsletter Volume 2 No 1.

Thami's drawing skills developed through his training at Rorke's Drift and also under the guidance of artist and educator Bill Ainslie, whom he met through Wally Serote. Ainslie made an important contribution in encouraging several young black artists to seek out the wellspring of their individual creativity. Thami was also influenced by other contemporary South African artists like Cyprian Shilakoe, whose style also invites the viewer into a mysterious interior world. But he was more directly influenced by the work of Fikile Magadla. Thami and Fikile spent evenings together listening to music and discussing their art, especially their appreciation of Dali. Thami's admiration for Surrealist painter Salvador Dali remained for years to come, but Fikile did not want to be called a Surrealist, preferring the term 'mysticism' to describe his work. Thami's style was expressive of the mood of hope and fear experienced within the Black Consciousness Movement as the state cracked down on its activists. The surreal spaces he created in his works could be macabre, but at the same time the vulnerability of disintegrating human forms evoked a possibility of transformation into a new state of being.

EXHIBITING IN SOWETO

On June 16 1976 a peaceful march by thousands of Soweto school students, protesting Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, erupted into a violent confrontation with police. Stones were thrown and children shot and killed by police. More uprisings followed all over the country. A year later, the national executive committee of the ANC dedicated 10 days to discussing the outcome of the uprising and a structural reorganization of the movement. The people inside the country were no longer demotivated, and the ANC's political wing inside and outside the country could be restructured.

In September of 1977 Thami exhibited his and Fikile Magadla's drawings with Ben Arnold's sculpture at the Dube YWCA.

The exhibition was organised by the newly-founded Soweto Arts Association (Soarta) as an alternative to exhibiting on the Johannesburg commercial gallery circuit. It was sponsored with donations from Anglo American's Zac de Beer. On opening night, 15 September, thousands of people crammed into the hall. The three young artists refused to sell, saying their works should be

a resource for the people. The exhibition travelled, also moving to Regina Mundi Church, a centre for activist meetings in Soweto. 'We made that exhibition after having discussed very thoroughly what we paint, why we paint... you know, something to do with what was happening around... We got a very interesting response, a very critical response... in a positive sense. There were more than 4000 people crammed into that space... We the artists were very excited because it means we communicated, you know, something clicked,' he told Tim Williams years later.

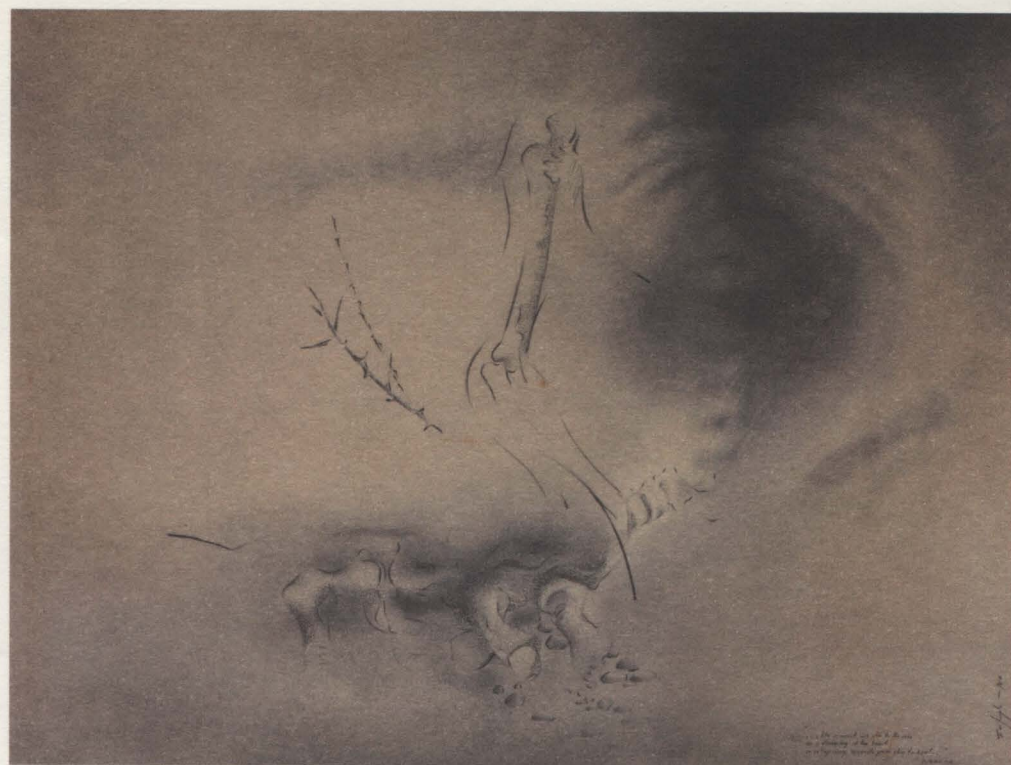
Thami carried out his resolve not to exhibit in a commercial gallery by deciding to continue creating his fine art 'for posterity', but also acquiring pragmatic visual arts skills in the workplace as a layout designer. 'With these community-oriented skills I thought I would be able to carry out work when issues arise and whenever my community demands it – for example posters, banners, pamphlets, illustrations for newsletters... that way then my activities would not be alien to my community.'*

* Mnyele, T. *Observations*

He worked as an illustrator and assistant printer at Sached, established with European funding and with links to London University to provide alternatives to the inferior South African standards of black education, and for the publishing house Ravan Press. He was now earning a steady income. He fell in love and married radiographer Naniwe Mputa and the couple bought a four-room house in Thembisa. Their daughter Nomathamsanqa was born in 1977.



Photo of Naniwe (Mputa) and Thami.



Like a wreck we die, 1980, pen and pastel on paper, 40.5 x 53.5 cm, Courtesy of the MTN Art Collection.

CHOOSING EXILE

Although Thami's personal situation was stable, politically his environment was not. The suspicious circumstances of Steve Biko's death were widely exposed in the media, and weighed heavily on the minds of all, especially in the light of the blatant public comment of Minister of Police Jimmy Kruger that Biko's death 'left him cold'.

Thami started questioning his own contribution to his people's struggle. He was feeling restless. Soarta collapsed, there was no more Mihloti and Mdali, and Thami was feeling trapped in his marriage. In 1978 Thami visited Wally in Gaborone, where he was living after studying in New York for a few years. Wally was working to revive the spirit of Mihloti in the form of Pelindaba Cultural Unit (meaning 'wait no more'). He was meeting with South African exiles, and getting involved with the ANC. Thami was missing the articulate and communal days of the early 1970s. On returning to Johannesburg he remarked: 'Those guys outside are working, while we inside are not doing any work.' He decided to leave his family and move to Gaborone. He crossed the border at Tlokweng Gate on 10 August 1979. The most important possessions he had decided to take with him were six drawings rolled up tightly in brown paper.

Amidst the political upheaval of the late 1970s, few exiles chose as freely as Thami Mnyele did to leave South Africa. But an uncompromising commitment had led him to making that choice. Nadine Gordimer would say just three years later in Gaborone: 'Every artist, wherever he lives, however circumstances use him, has to struggle through what Pablo Neruda calls the 'labyrinths' of his chosen medium of expression. That is the condition of the artist's inner being.'* In 1980 Thami made a drawing of his new friend Tim Williams (originally from Soweto) represented in deep contemplation as he leans on a barbed wire fence. On the drawing Thami wrote three lines from Pablo Neruda's poem *Death alone*, written when the poet, like Thami, was 31 years old: '... like a wreck we die to the very core, as if drowning at the heart or collapsing inwards, from skin to soul'*. He titled the drawing 'Consequences.'* The flat horizon and thorn trees of the Botswana landscape were reminiscent of the rural Makapanstad area of his school years; the air was just as dry. But Thami was in contact with Wally Serote, who had first welcomed him into the arts community. When they met years ago in Alexandra, both artists were responding to their circumstances, trying to gain a wider perspective of their lives. Now they were meeting on new ground.

* Gordimer, N. (1982), *Relevance and commitment. Apprentices of Freedom Paper* delivered at the MEDU Culture and Resistance Symposium

Immediately after the June 1976 Soweto uprising many students fled to Botswana. They could be seen in large numbers on Gaborone's streets and in its two shopping malls. Up to 30 000 exiles entered Botswana from South Africa and Rhodesia (the present Zimbabwe) in that period, forcing the government to establish Dukwe refugee camp, well away from Gaborone and the border. The government of Botswana granted asylum to exiles, but was required to maintain a delicate diplomatic balance with regards to its economically powerful neighbour, South Africa. But for his friends, Thami might well have been sent to the camp at Dukwe. Instead, through Wally and his acquaintance, the writer Mandla Langa, Thami found a home with Albio González and his wife Teresa Devant, who became his great friends. The Swedish Aid Mission (Sida) had employed Albio to work in the Department of Town and Regional Planning as senior planner. The arts community in Gaborone included exiles and foreign professionals.

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SIDE



JOHANNESBURG ART GALLERY

THAMI MNYELE
+ MEDU

ART ENSEMBLE RETROSPECTIVE

30.11.2008
31.03.2009

MEDU ART ENSEMBLE



Poster: Portrait of Thami by Judy Seidman. (Collection Judy Seidman)

A few months before Thami came to Gaborone, Wally Serote and a few other former Mithloti members had started an arts organisation they named Medu Art Ensemble ('medu' meaning 'roots' in Sepedi).

Medu set out to teach arts skills to both exiles and local Gaborone residents. Its aims were in line with the broad southern African community arts movement of the time, which encouraged ordinary, disempowered people to reclaim their social rights and responsibilities. Medu's aims were also in line with ANC policy; a significant fact as Wally and Tim Williams joined both the ANC and MK, as Thami would also. Albio and Teresa were the first white members invited to join Medu. Soon others followed, although this shift in policy alienated some BCM and PAC members who were part of Medu initially.

Design for badges distributed at the *Culture and Resistance Symposium* in Gaborone, 1982.

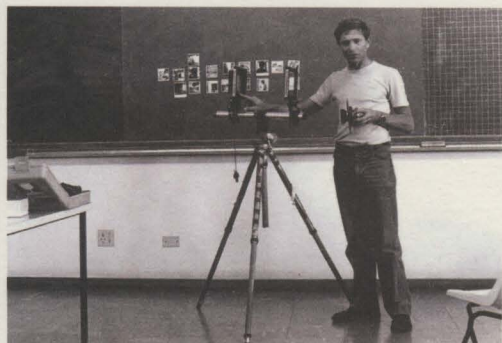


RELEVANCE & COMMITMENT

Medu provided training workshops in a range of arts skills, including creative writing, theatre, music, photography, film and graphic art. These units were coordinated by a central publications and research unit, tasked to produce and dispatch regular newsletters within Botswana and South Africa, whether by mail or smuggled across the border in the luggage of recent visitors. Medu believed that artists should assume a didactic role in promoting and developing cultural awareness within their communities; that the real experience of others presented in a compelling visual image, a theatrical performance or any other art form, could offer communities a way of reflecting on their own social context.

Photography is a most effective medium for capturing the reality of society and suggesting its hidden truths. Medu's photographic training therefore focused both on technical competence and on how to 'read' an image. Photographic unit head Mike Kahn's position at the University of Botswana provided much-needed access to dark room equipment. Tim Williams was also part of the unit and documented important social and cultural events. During the run of David Goldblatt's exhibition *Things 'round here* at Johannesburg's Market Theatre - the product of twenty years of documenting white South African suburbia - the photographer travelled to Gaborone to present a two-day Medu photographic workshop at the university. A wealth of South African talent was represented in Gaborone again in 1982, when Medu organised an art and photography exhibition called *Art towards Social Development*. What was originally Albio's idea of taking an all South African travelling exhibition to Sweden was now developed into a large-scale, local project. The exhibition would be combined with a full symposium on the theme of 'Culture and Resistance', as well as a performing arts festival. Up to 28 South African photographers responded to Medu's call to exhibit in Gaborone, attracted no doubt by the prospect of presenting a true picture of the South African cultural reality and an authentic view of South African society, unblemished by censorship.

When he first joined Medu, Albio González brought another valuable skill to the organisation, which in time proved to be one of the most effective weapons Medu could wield in the struggle against apartheid. Albio was born in Cuba and after settling in Sweden as an adult, he was involved in designing posters for the Swedish-Cuban Friendship Association. During a stay in Cuba he noticed how effectively posters and billboards could project a political message. When Wally asked Albio to set up poster production for Medu's graphic unit, he set about acquiring the necessary silkscreening equipment. He found the technical expertise he needed when visiting German artist Petra Röhr-Rouendaal offered Medu a workshop in silkscreen technique. Basil Jones, a University of Cape Town Michaelis School of Art graduate who was working at Botswana's National Museum and Art Gallery, was a constant source of expertise, comments Albio. He was also involved in organising the 1982 exhibition.



David Goldblatt seen during a two-day photography workshop at the University of Botswana organised by Medu, 9 May 1981, Photo: Albio González.



Tim Williams, Photo: Albio González.



Wally Serote hanging the Marumo poster, 29 June 1979, Photo: Albio González

THE GRAPHICS UNIT

Medu's graphics unit was tasked to produce covers for the regular Medu newsletter and to make posters with a clear political message. The posters would be folded twice and inserted into the newsletters, before they found their way into South Africa. There they were treasured and photocopied; the posters were most often banned by the South African security police as soon as they were discovered. Thami was asked to head the graphics unit, though during his first few months with Medu he was rather preoccupied with preparing for his solo exhibition at the Gaborone National Museum in September 1980, titled *Statements in Spring*.

Albio González produced the very first Medu poster for the theatre unit's production of the play *Marumo*, written by Mandla Langa to commemorate the historic battle of Isandlwana, which had taken place exactly 150 years before. The story of the heroic Zulu victory over British occupation was used to motivate people in their present situation of oppression. Albio's poster design integrated a British army helmet with a spear and an AK47 assault rifle.

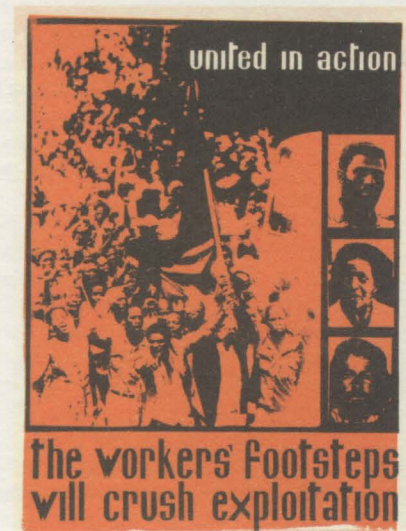
The graphics unit developed over 80 posters altogether, working in a truly collective ethos. Wally Serote usually initiated the main issue each newsletter cover and poster would deal with. A Medu member would suggest an idea for expressing the concept, and discussion would follow. Wally thought Albio's idea, for example, of representing the Voortrekker Monument with an ANC flag smashed into its top, too provocative. Albio felt that the group's political consciousness was strengthened by the simple exercise of discussing the message behind poster designs. These discussions could lead to intense debates on what one 'should' portray and communicate through art, remembers Judy Seidman. Each poster had a primary designer, but up to 200 copies were printed by the group. Thami liked to say they worked like musicians playing off one another's ideas. In July 1981 Thami was elected chairman of Medu; a year before the symposium was to take place.

Other important members of the graphics unit were Phillip Segola, Miles Pelo, Heinz Klugg and Gordon Metz. Lentzwe Mokgatle joined after the symposium. 'Medu was by no means an isolated group in designing posters,' comments Judy Seidman, 'many ideas and principles were cross-hatched with groups inside South Africa, including the many cultural circles linked to *Staffrider* magazine and the emergent poster-making groups of the Cape Arts Project.'

*Seidman, J. *Drawing Lines: Belief, emotion and aesthetic in the South African poster movement*. MTN Art Institute



Rhona Segale, Thami Mnyele and Albio González.



Medu Art Ensemble poster *United in action*, silkscreen



Medu Art Ensemble poster *June 16 Commemorative Exhibition*, silkscreen

PUBLICATION & RESEARCH

The publications and research unit was seen as the nerve centre of Medu. It was tasked with making contact with South African arts groups and networking with those abroad. To produce the quarterly newsletter, it conducted research from newspapers and other sources, keeping a simple filing system of cardboard boxes. There was a box for theatre, another for photography, for the visual arts and so on. In later years the unit benefited from Sechaba, a newsletter compilation of articles from South African newspapers, brought out by the ANC in London.

This focus on research and networking, however modest initially, was most significant if one considers the contact that was being maintained in arts circles between Botswana and South Africa. Through its contacts in South Africa, Medu was kept informed of what was happening on the ground. 'When it came close to the symposium on Culture and Resistance,' recalls Albio González, 'Medu was able to gather information about small, struggling cultural groups that might otherwise never have reached the limelight.'

The real conceptualisation of each newsletter started with a round table discussion of the events of the preceding three months. The series of Medu newsletters produced reveals the collective's thinking. A stirring editorial would open each edition, to be followed by content ranging from comment on current news and political developments, to contributions of creative writing, with a final section of interviews with members of other Medu units, on their work and ideas. Guided by Wally Serote as head of this unit, producing each newsletter would involve the other units, such as the graphics unit for cover design and illustration. Many newsletters were themed, with articles related to for example the United Nation's International Year of the Child.

It is extraordinary to think that the newsletters were all written by hand and then laboriously typed on a stencil (which was temperamental and could tear easily). The actual printing process involved squeezing a tube of ink onto the rolling surface of the roneo machine, and then attaching the stencil before rolling out the production. The collation and stapling of the newsletters was done in a co-operative manner by all the members of the various units.

The first Medu editorial, typed on the unit's only typewriter, reads:

This is the first issue of MEDU ART ENSEMBLE. This is our modest attempt at recreating a consciousness that will re awaken our people's thirst for freedom. Someone once asked us, 'How is your art going to aid in the liberation struggle?' 'I mean', he continued, 'how are poems and trumpets going to bring the downfall of Vorster's regime?' It may well serve us here to answer that question by quoting a well-known black South African poet, Keorapatse Kgositsile:

'Culture is the sum total of what is produced by man's creative genius; this creativity is collective; every society has a culture, some cultures are exploitative and others are not; all cultures have a social and political base.'



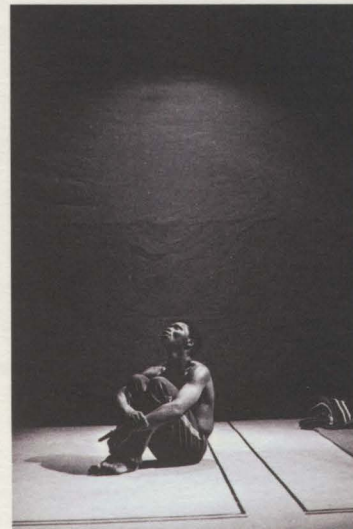
Medu Newsletter (Volume 6, No 1 & 2).

MEDU PERFORMING ARTS

Medu Art Ensemble is remembered by most South Africans in Gaborone at the time, whether living in exile or attending the symposium of July 1982, as a highly successful cultural initiative. Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, well known for the acclaimed Handspring Puppet Company they established in the early 1980s, were like many others living in Gaborone to avoid being drafted for the South African army. Adrian, who was attached to the university, remarks that what was so extraordinary about the city of Gaborone, being the size of what in South Africa would affectionately be called a *dorp*, was that it functioned as an international cultural hive. The best of cultural and intellectual stimulation was on offer. World-class jazz musicians Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela played with both South African and Botswana musicians at local clubs. British jazz critic Gwen Ansell lived in Gaborone for several years. She relates that at the same time as the exiles were thoroughly enjoying themselves at clubs like *The Blue Note*, people would be engaged in intense, heated debate about political issues. 'The apartheid state implied there was no culture amongst black South Africans; but here at Medu there was a proliferation of it! People were living their convictions,' remembers Jonas Gwangwa. 'To be playing those songs like *Skokiaan* and *Shebeen* and *Grazing in the Grass* in front of such a responsive audience – that was something,' remembers musician Steve Dyer. 'When it got to being paid, I was just so happy to have got the opportunity; I said something to Bra Hugh like, the money wasn't important and he said: 'Yes my laaitie, it is'. Other members of the Medu music unit were Denis Mpale, Hugh Masekela, Lindi Phahle and Tony Cedras.

Medu's theatre unit brought the struggle of the people of southern Africa to the stage. The unit staged plays and held poetry recitals, usually presented with music. Poems by Mongane Wally Serote, Dennis Brutus, Mandla Langa, Keorapatse Kgositsile, Chris van Wyk and Agosthinto Neto were read often. Teresa Devant, who had trained in Barcelona, ably led the theatre unit. With the Medu conference drawing near, by January 1982 Wally and Teresa used their contacts in Johannesburg and at the Market Theatre to bring actors Lammy Shoba and Joko Scott to Gaborone, to act in Wally Serote's play *Shades of Change*; an inspiring dialogue between two political prisoners in adjoining cells, awaiting turns of violent interrogation. It was described by Medu at the time as 'a play about the two sides which are locked in battle in South Africa. On the one side, there is the oppressed and exploited majority of the people who are fighting for peace and progress; on the other side, there is the minority fighting for racism, oppression and exploitation.' Besides being performed at the conference, it was hoped the play would also tour the townships of South Africa, but the two actors were concerned about reprisals because of its strong political message.

On 4 and 5 July 1982 delegates arrived for the symposium in their hundreds. Some arrived at the University of Gaborone venue stiff and exhausted after a 20-hour bus journey from as far as Cape Town. But all were soon energised by the exhilaration of the Medu performing arts festival, which would follow in the evenings after an intense day of debate evoked by a range of speakers - all foremost names in progressive South African cultural circles. 'The Culture and Resistance symposium was incredible,' recalls Steve Dyer. 'The energy in the air was palpable. Great thinkers – poets, musician, soldiers, artists, intellectuals uniting for five days. For the first time, a gathering of activists and sympathizers from inside and outside of South Africa were meeting at an organized forum. Many delegates raged, given that people had different beliefs. I remember a friend telling me of one ANC comrade intent on showing his bona fides, proclaiming that he could go and get his uniform, another from Black Consciousness grabbing his own cheek and saying that was his uniform!'



Joko Scott rehearsing *Shades of Change* at the National Museum, Gaborone, February 1982, Albio González



Medu Art Ensemble poster *Culture and Resistance* Symposium, 1982, silkscreen

ART AS A CULTURAL WEAPON

At the *Culture and Resistance* symposium a platform was created for 'the human factors of consciousness, morale and ideas' that Rusty Bernstein, drafter of the Freedom Charter, found lacking in Operation Mayibuye's emphasis on armed struggle; an ironic thought perhaps, because one of the reasons why Medu was founded by MK cadre Wally Serote was to serve as a front for the covert activities of MK cadres, including smuggling hand grenades and posters bearing messages of freedom and resistance to South Africa.

The poster movement was well timed and useful to the ANC in trying to re-mobilise the masses at the first stirrings of labour union resistance. 'The role of Medu's newsletters and posters, once distributed inside the Republic, cannot be overestimated in a country where neither the press, nor television nor radio were willing, or permitted, to express the voice of the oppressed,' comments Albio González. Tim Williams insists that Medu's cultural and military agendas were kept distinct. If at times similar routes were followed for distributing newsletters and hand grenades in South

Africa, the cultural weapons of posters and newsletters were never distributed with military hardware, he says. Thami was also involved in these activities, now being a cadre of MK himself. After the symposium both Thami and his new partner, Rhona Segale, underwent MK training in Angola. They were married on 31 May 1985 in the Gaborone magistrate's court. By now Rhona had given birth to their son, Sindi.

On the night of 13-14 June 1985, shortly before the South African government declared a state of emergency, allowing it to implement a continual military presence in the townships, a South African Defence Force squad launched an attack on several Gaborone homes. The homes of particular Medu members had been earmarked. Thami was at home alone on that night, working late. As soldiers burst into his house, firing machine guns, he ran out of the back door. He was gunned down against his own fence. A week later, security police officer Craig Williamson appeared on SABCTV news, holding up hand grenades he said were taken from the raided houses as proof of terrorist activities. Drawings from Thami Mnyele's portfolio were also confiscated as evidence. Mike Hamlyn, George and Lindi Phahle were killed, along with several other innocent civilians. Many years later Diana Wylie sought out members of the squad

that raided Thami's home that night. She found Hans Louw, who had been a team leader in Special Branch, in prison for non-political offences. She writes: 'Hans Louw understands that he was once deluded by the 'gaudy rhetoric' of people like general Magnus Malan, who made him believe that 'defeat in Namibia would compel us to retreat to the streets of Pretoria and spark a global wave of communist triumphs.' Now he sees that this threat masked 'a grim common thing', the deliberate execution of black civilians and more broadly, a 'war against blacks' throughout the region.

He appreciates the commitment of people like Thami, who were so intensely nationalistic that they were willing to 'give their lives for their cause'. Their faith made them as resilient as green branches: 'they could be bent, but not broken'. And so, the war against them was unwinnable. Louw credits Eugene de Kock, 'fellow casualty' of the dirty wars to maintain white supremacy, with having helped him to face painful questions about war, murder, memory and guilt. ... Now that he sees through the sham of that faith, he writes with a ferocity based on painful knowledge, whose truth should resonate far beyond South Africa: 'A nation has no business sending its young men into battle without lasting moral justification.' *

* Wylie, D. p 232.

AN ARCHIVE OF CULTURE & RESISTANCE

The raid of 1985 brought Medu to its knees. But memories of the groundbreaking debate at the *Culture and Resistance* conference of 1982 lives on with many contemporary arts practitioners. And the artworks exhibited and papers delivered by major scholars remain as an extraordinary archive, created for a future which is our present. The questions raised beg for answers still.

An art student in Sweden at the time, Anna Erlandsson attended the symposium as an observer; and recorded her impressions of both speakers and audience with the energetic sketches on this page.

An extract from Nadine Gordimer's paper, titled *Relevance and Commitment: Apprentices of Freedom, follows:**

'The nature of art in South Africa today is primarily determined by the conflict between material interests in South African society. We must acknowledge that as racial problems can hope to be solved only in circumstances of economic equality, so the creative potential of our country cannot be discussed without realisation and full acceptance that fulfillment of that potential can be aimed for only on the premise of future economic equality... Black artists, including writers, will be primarily concerned with a resuscitation of the pre-colonial culture as a basis for an indigenous modern African culture. The colonial period (in which I include the South African apartheid republic) is seen as an interruption...

But to embody the objective reality of modern blacks they will have to synthesise with all this the aspirations of people who still want TV and jeans... It is comparatively easy to create a people's art – that is to say an aesthetic expression of fundamentally shared experience – during a period when the central experience of all, intellectuals, workers and peasants alike, is oppression... it will be quite another matter when the impact of experience breaks up into differing categories of class experience. The avowed black aim is a culture springing from and belonging to the people, not an elite.

* The phrase: 'Apprentices of Freedom' after Octavio Mannoni in *Prospero and Caliban*

Gavin Jantjes was asked to discuss the role of the visual artist:

'Art is the complex heart of our cultural body,' he said. 'There have been times when outside forces have claimed we had no culture. In our time it is claimed, by government spokesmen and the like, that things are being done for the development of our cultural tradition. Both claims are attempts to hold ground, to perpetuate the status quo ...

'Important for the dynamics of most revolutionary movements in Africa was the acknowledgement that they have lived under a false sense of history. If we as artists could start with the acknowledgement that we have been practising our art under a false sense of our art history, then I believe our movement forward holds many pleasant surprises and frightful truths... The opinions held on African art today are those nurtured by the hothouse nurserymen of African art. Like prize roses they have pruned African art to fit into their cultural garden.'

Literary scholar Richard Rive called for artistic vision: 'One must interpret the realities of the present in order to realise the future. The writer therefore does not only create literature, but creates literature in a climate. If that climate is not conducive to his realization of himself as a human being then he must, through his art, try to change that society. To do so he must not only have a viewpoint, but also a vision...' Dr Rive ended his paper by quoting the words of the exiled poet Arthur Nortje:

**And let no amnesia
Attack at fire hour;
For some of us must storm the castles
Some define the happenings**

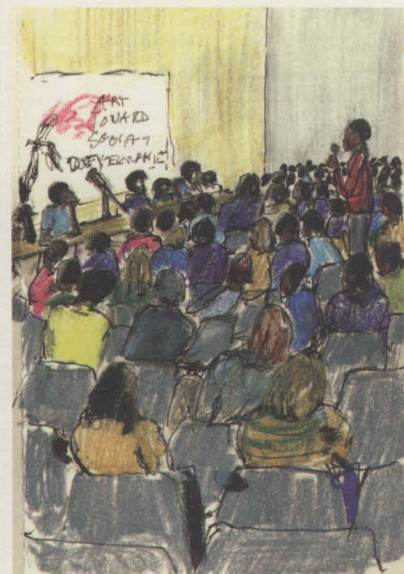
* Nortje, A. *Native's Letter*



Nadine Gordimer by Anna Erlandsson



Gavin Jantjes by Anna Erlandsson



Culture and Resistance Symposium by Anna Erlandsson



Thami Mnyele, Drawing for a poster design to be inserted in a Medu newsletter.

AN IMAGINATIVE REVOLUTIONARY

Thami pondered the words of Guinean president Sékou Touré shortly after going into exile: 'It is not enough to write a revolutionary song. You must fashion the revolution with the people.' A few years later, in an interview with Tim Williams for Medu newsletter Volume 2 number 1, Thami reminisced about the 1977 *A New Day* exhibition in Soweto: 'The works that were exhibited were a means of communication... A *New Day* exhibition was about involving an artist in the affairs of himself and therefore of his people. The true artist and his artistic striving must coincide with the interest of the class which is the maker of his life, and I don't know if there is any of us so far who has achieved this precious sense of social commitment in our activities as artists. I mean this precious element of socialism.' With his deepening political commitment, Thami's art eventually took on a didactic and illustrative style. It served a functional purpose, rather than a contemplative one. Those who admire Thami's earlier work sometimes express dismay at what they see as a *stylistic* development. But whether the personal integrity that informed Thami's early work could continue without the self-sacrifice that informed it, is another question.

Had he made different choices, had his circumstances been kinder, would Thami have been with us still? Would he have been a participant of the Thupelo workshops Bill Ainslie presented at the Johannesburg Art Foundation in the 1980s? Would he, as part of our time, been part of the Pan African identity explored in the travelling exhibition *Africa Remix*? Others are doing so in his name: The Thami Mnyele Foundation, established in 1992, runs a three month artists-in-residence programme in Amsterdam, with the main objective of advancing cultural exchange between artists from all over Africa and the Netherlands. Thami did participate in something similar, when, in December 1982, shortly after the Botswana *Culture and Resistance* symposium, the Dutch Anti-Apartheid Movement (AABN) hosted a conference titled *The Cultural Voice of Resistance* in Amsterdam. It was conceived as an encounter between Dutch and exiled South African artists, and Medu was well represented. The conference sought to challenge a cultural treaty of 1951 between the Netherlands and South Africa, characterised by Dutch progressives as an artificial dialogue between the wrong partners.

The members of Medu Ensemble also sought to overturn entrenched boundaries. As cultural revolutionaries, they fought to give birth to a new culture which would replace a bourgeoisie Wally Serote referred to as 'those sick with wealth'. They adopted the freedom slogans of revolutions elsewhere in the world, though theirs was very different to the Russian and Chinese communist reality. Diana Wylie observes that Malevich's political cartoons of a peasant woman in red, stabbing soldiers with a pitchfork and a man cutting them down with a scythe, foreshadowed subsequent actions. 'In South Africa, by contrast, the cultural revolution that occurred after the nineties resulted in wider acceptance of cultural mixing or *métissage*. It achieved inclusion in the capitalist world they knew, not a new world they created as revolutionaries.'

* Wylie, D. p. 245.

The story of Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble is one of transformation: 'From a disintegrated consciousness, all, black and white, seek wholeness in themselves and a reconnection with the voltage of a new social dynamism. The revolutionary sense, in artistic terms, is the sense of totality, the conception of a 'whole' world, where theory and action meet in the imagination,' said Nadine Gordimer at the conference. Her words hold true still, if we remember them.

Once more: the distances

You shall remember
- because memory, unlike the eye, knows no sleep -
that today comes from a past yesterday.
the footprints of that past day
like the wind
are everywhere now

Wally Serote, an extract from: *The Night Keeps Winking*, an anthology published by Medu Art Ensemble.

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