

Kam...
for... 6-2-1-1

OBSERVATIONS ON THE STATE OF THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS
IN SOUTH AFRICA

I find it a little daring on my part to make public my impressions and therefore suggestions in regard to the state of the graphic arts in my country, South Africa. I find it daring because the role carries with it the risk of implicating me as a spokesman. On the other hand I find it dangerous that I should sit back and watch while crucial decisions are made over my work and my destiny. Failure to partake in the deliberations (some of which are well-intentioned) implies ignorance of those fundamental issues which affect our lives as people . . . they make or break us. This paper is far from being representative; never-the-less, with complete honesty I think certain things need to be said.

It is my contention that the strife and struggle that manifests itself in the arts is subject to and linked with the broad socio-political struggle at home and indeed in the world internationally. What it means is that whatever artistic indulgence we engage ourselves in must not be blind to the river of life within and around us, that social stream from which art feeds and is nourished: the community.

I had dropped out of school and with chronic feelings of FAILURE, I spent my days searching for employment in the surrounding industrial complex that bordered my township. This financial source of income would secure me in the meantime for my dream of becoming a good artist, I thought. Whenever I looked around me for those among our artists who were famous and said to be successful, their situation shocked me and would tend to confuse me. Here the artists seemed most popular only in white suburban circles; they did not seem to have any material means; house, or decent home, and they seemed to have found pleasure in heavy drinking. Of the most popular artists in the community were the musicians, of the Marabi idiom. They composed songs about almost everything and everybody around them, and the songs were imbued with warm emotional lyricism which always sustained the people with a range of feelings, of joy, pity, love, anger and even violence. The people loved bra Zakes Nkosi and bra Ntemis bands, but seemed to hate them intensely sometimes. When I grew up I had heard stories that musicians were made to play one favorite song right through-out the night to the next morning, at knife point. But no, I think that the musicians were the most loved artists by the people. They performed both in wedding ceremonies as well as in those dark processions of death. The musicians did manage to walk the streets of Alex at midnight and lived to play Marabi the following day unharmed. The musicians were as popular as the herbalists and some shopkeepers of Alexandra township.

Any day whenever I sat around with the artists, conversation centered around the unfairness and the exploitation of the artists by the art galleries, recording companies, publishing houses and how biased art critics and the editors were towards the artists' works. In the light of these issues we organised ourselves into an arts group and called ourselves MHLITI BLACK THEATRE. This was in 1971. Mhloti was composed of writers, musicians, painters, actors and a few members of the community, i.e. intellectuals, church people, etc. Our main theatrical piece was based on the thoughts of Malcolm X. It was in this play where I tried myself on stage. Suddenly I was experiencing a surge of internal satisfaction. In this theatre piece I had one of the longest roles wherein I had to recite the longest passages from Malcolm's Message to the Grassroots. Theatre gave me feelings of purpose and practical fulfilment. The actual engagement of the physical, standing there and towering over the little crowd of people of my township, seated, silent but nodding their heads occasionally, when I had made another good point, it was just great. The act of theatrical performance is more immediate than making pictures, I thought, Here ~~one~~ there surrounding by the community, alive, blood and sweat and flesh. . . set free from the loneliness and aloneness of paintings and confinement.

The play jerked us with something that felt like self-confidence (or shall I say aggressiveness?) and venom on our tongues. We perused through the literature of the Black American struggle of the sixties . . . We consumed George Jackson's Blood in My Eye, Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis' If the Come in the Morning; we discussed the Back to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey and the many 'black brothers and soul sisters', and of course the Black Panthers.

Mhloti started having problems. First it was the difficulty in getting the keys from the clinic's caretaker, who just would get lost in the small houses of the clinic; some members of the community who were our supporters showed signs of unco-operativeness, like not allowing their kids to attend our performances. The parents would send their child to Soweto on the day of the play. Soon the problem came into the open: the people had had visits from the Special Branch police and were afraid. With aggressive pride and venom on our tongues Mhloti stuck together against these sad developments, in the name of Black Brotherhood and Black Art. It was at the height of these feelings of revenge that a creeping atmosphere of doubt (just tiredness?) embraced a tiny section of Mhloti. What was this all about? Amilcar Cabral and Angostino Neto. One scholarly friend among us, quite a sharp boy in terms of political theories bla bla bla, had been reading a lot about that he told us was the liberation struggle in Guinea Bissau and Angola. He told us the was had ~~already~~ started in neighbouring Mozambique as well! But what had this to do with our Mhloti then, one cut him short. First: according to Amilcar Cabral the people of the Portuguese colonies and indeed of the occupied territories are suffering under a political system which aims to exploit the territories of food, minerals, land, etc. The wealth is then destined for the bellies of those who uphold the system and those of their friends in the Western European countries. (Was this the introduction to a new play, we thought?) But our friend continued:

This system, taken in the context of our country takes the form of racial prejudice. . . . At this point he stopped and asked, weren't some blacks ardent supporters and upholders of the doctrines of this system;² who denies us rehearsal space in Thabisa and in Alexandra Secondary School; who runs the Bantustans, and alas, who is fighting the PAIGC, Frelimo and the MPLA; certainly not ~~they~~ the whiteman. An atmosphere of confusion, of doubt overcame our speech and raging argument, with most of us trying to convince him and ourselves that every single whiteman is fundamentally a murderer. I developed a conflict deep within: Was I ~~blaming~~ myself that those white musicians who, collectively, produced such great music with Dollar Brand, were murderers? The music was so good that almost every single house in Alex had the record. Was I implying that Bram Fischer was rotting in prison and that was of no consequence? That it was less hurtful to be slapped across the face by a black policeman than a white one? It was better to be mauled by a local lion than a foreign one? IWithin

Within these developments, Mhloti had to contend with another problem. Under that notorious Group Areas Act, Alex was to be a Coloureds-only area, therefore a process of removals was on the way. + Already one friend's family was leaving for Soweto, another one had already started staying in Eldorado Park with his brother. But generally it had become difficult to catch a gathering of the complete membership of Mhloti since.

Within the conflicts of the day, was the artist's need for technical skills and intellectual education? A section of the younger generation was dissatisfied with the conditions of the people and that of the older artists generally, but we had difficulty of articulation. Having vowed to improve our techniques and knowledge in art, we spent time individually visiting those among the white artists who were as sympathetic as to impart their skills. These trips to and from the white suburbs were always followed by an exhibition of one's paint pictures in a city art gallery, a few pictures sold, an encouraging article in the English newspaper and a month's improvement of relations in my mother's house. The desperate need for a source of financial income resulted in a near stampede in putting up art exhibitions by the artists. We shall have time later to discuss the nature of the work that came out of this era and events.

A few years earlier one painter had come from Worcester in the Cape Province and had come for TB treatment in Baragwanath Hospital. During his process of recovery in hospital this man had shown signs of great artistic prospects and was immediately spotted by a friend who settled him in his house in the white area of Johannesburg. We shall make an attempt at commenting on the work of this man: due to the problems he had relating to the influx control system, the artist was threatened with arrest for being an illegal person in Johannesburg as well as being an idle Bantu (ie unemployed). There he spent all or most of his days in the house painting, sculpting, painting and sculpting with passion. He always listened to the troubled music of John Coltrane and Munkunku, and over this painful state of his predicament he smeared his canvasses with the lives of the underprivileged. The artworks showed a man who had a lot to say: in the pictures you would see all the movements and conflicting situations of slum life: a church made out of a few corrugated iron sheets . . . a preacher preaching while holding a mad woman's hand on the one hand and the bible on the other, whereas right on top of the shoulders of the priest himself, a youth is eating grapes from the tree with fork

himself, a youth is eating grapes from the tree with fork and knife; hungry child-bearing women; men with drooping shoulders; ugly busses without window panes, skeletal dogs and those aggressive township rats in dark avenues. When I grew up I found that the newspapers always carried an article on Dumile. His work sold a lot. Most art galleries would impress it upon any African painter that he should paint "many township scenes", and of course there grew a large unorganised movement of township artists who painted what came to be termed "township art". The art galleries in Johannesburg became the outposts of African township art to their mother art galleries in Paris, London and New York. What was fundamentally an anguished outpouring of revolt against such life, against such a system, by an artist who suffered so much, was betrayed. It was reduced to sentimental caricatures of primitive community of people, who were satisfied with "their way of life". The picture of a few lads with hunched backs playing penny whistles and that of them eating watermelons were made into prints and were printed in thousands each, for sale. Dumile did not stay to help resolve the situation of the arts in South Africa and with pain and frustration in his heart he left for London never to return home. When one popular art gallery in Jo'burg grew to like my work, the director advised me, ". . . work hard, do not let people disturb you . . . you see, Dumile was a good artist but he messed things up for himself by associating with the politicians." Again it was not long when one famous African sculptor from Springs told me with concern that Dumile "had his work hung in the offices of the ANC, how dare an artist do that!" Unlike the writers, the artists were a curiosity in the community and what they painted seemed less destined for the immediate community. It lacked immediacy of communication. The artists always had contempt for one another. Whenever you visit one he tells you the other one copies his style; that the other is a politician more than an artist; that those ones in that township seldom buy beer or cigarettes; that he wants to go overseas one day and to hell with South Africa.

Through the help of a good friend I secured a financial grant from Anglo American Corporation that enabled me to study art in the ELC Art Centre in Rorkes' Drift. There I worked in more techniques: line cutting, etching, sculpture, tapestry, graphic design and studied history of art. But I came to realise that this school was far from what I wished to develop into: a good artist. Much time was spent under a deserted atmosphere of religion where only technique was the core of art discussion and learning. Rorkes' Drift was something like a humanitarian institution where the underprivileged people would be encouraged into developing those skills and techniques which would enable them to be self-supportive. Art and handicrafts were the available skills. Rorkes Drift was helpful and important to us on those very bases. Rorkes Drift art centre had offered small paying jobs to many peasants from neighbouring villages. In this small way the institution contributed to elevating the scourge of malnutrition from the starving Zululand community. Rorkes Drift was not a top class art academy, so my dream of serious art upbringing wasn't forthcoming, I predicted. The school was plagued by lack of enough art teachers due to the government's suspicion and hostility to the expatriate mission community. The art teacher clearly avoided discussion on content in a work of

art and we supposed he was afraid to jeopardise his stay in South Africa.

But I had to terminate by studies in order to secure my family's right to stay in Alexandra. As a bread winner I had to be there and employed. At this point again I had become immersed in student politics, trying to understand my role as an artist in the struggle. The role of an artist in the processes of political struggle seemed an obscure area for the student movement to waste time in. It would sound unnecessarily farfetched to raise the question of Art to students whose preoccupations were graduation ceremonies, the whiteman and his colleagues. That evening when a 'gumba' was being organised in the Wentworth campus, I took a long walk to the Durban station and started on a lonely journey back home to Alexandra township, Johannesburg.

Everything had seemed too abstract for me, was too hard to absorb and believe, let alone agree with. I wanted to be a good artist, I told myself, and that meant that I needed to be skilled and articulate with my work. I hated the general notion that artists fundamentally are lawless men and women who wasted away their lives drunk and entertaining sensible people. The other image was that of the artist as a priest. But all in all, the South African artist was said to lack social or political awareness. Hence the artists were always at logger-heads with one another, unorganised and ultimately reactionary. So the best way of acquiring skills was through hiring myself out as a layout designer. Again a friend offered me employment as illustrator, layout artist and Jack of all trades. With these community oriented skills I thought I would be able to carry out work when issues arise and whenever my community demands it, e.g. posters, banners, pamphlets, illustrations for newsletters and of course I would still create my fine art for posterity. This way then my activities would not be alien to my community, I was convinced.

While working for SACHED Trust I had the means to buy and read books as well as records. The elements of abstraction, distortion, mystification, etc became the centre of a thorough analysis and all the way, my criterion was the reality of the situation, and the immediate community. Again I asked myself why had MDALI never concretely come off the ground after so many years of militant articles in the newspapers? What is a good artist in relation to a freedom fighter? For seven years I had worked at SACHED and now with a creeping feeling of wasting away I had grown bitter. I had the financial source of income, so what! What had this to do with being a committed artist? I had spent seven years making diagrams and pasting up pages for school textbooks: Biology, Economics, Geography, etc. Here in SACHED I had managed to pick up most of the skills I needed which would enable me to be of service back home: to be of service is to integrate. The musicians of the fifties had not integrated into the community, they were the community itself. The community produced songs about the sudden ban of the African brew by the government, the community performed at a child baptismal ceremony and the community skill performs at the funeral of a deceased member. Wouldn't it be good if I designed posters for these activities, painted banners, made postcards, Christmas cards, and taught these skills to those who need them? Who in my community noted my pretty little illustrations in the academic lectures? Certainly none but a small number of sophisticated

students who study in Sached with the hope that some contact will be made for a scholarship to Britain or America. All these had nothing to do with my ambition to become an articulate artists. But alas I had become so attached to many people in SACHED, so much that I fought back tears that afternoon when I bid them farewell.

It is my contention that any understanding of the development of art (or underdevelopment?) in my country cannot be divorced from the effects of the European Church, School and State. The education system is unfair and rather too verbalised, too theoretical and does not bridge the gap between intellectual and practical labour. Hence there seems to be no hope that the education can deal even with the fundamentals of production: it is through a polytechnic system of self-reliance that the general impotence in this education can be overcome. Only then could we enrich our personalities and grow into discerning and creative men and women who will naturally respect and value practical work. It is perhaps under a favourable political climate that the artist will see the need for organisation, research, learning and community involvement and development.

But how does the conflict of the South African artist characterize itself in an actual work of art? In most cases the images are acutely abstracted; the subject matter (content) is lost to the mystical; distortion plagues the visual and the artwork sags under a heavy veil of mystery. It will be noted that at this stage, the work has lost that essential quality of communication: the immediacy of communication with the masses the artist claims to address himself to. The claim is usually in the exhibition catalogue, in the titles of the pictures or on the posters. The other truth about these elements is that they are far from being neutral in terms of the political options of the community. They reflect a serious conflict and the state of the artist himself about those social, political and economic interests which exist at that moment. Some artists are not conscious about the actual content of their creations, whereas the others are fully aware politically but are not convinced. The art galleries are not only the monopoly outposts and shrines of the African art but they even determine what form and content the art should take. By mere promotion of the completely abstract, mystic and the less concerned politically, they have become an extended arm of the cruel government there. This does not exclude the expert on African art, the critic who issues out criticism from an alien position. The amount of complex terminology employed on "mystic" painting (in the English newspaper) leaves the average reader completely intimidated, while the related artist withdraws back into false self-importance. To him it means money, fame and travel. But fame, money and travel at what cost?

On the other hand the work of a socially committed artist is treated with traditional coldness. In this case the large part of the critique dwells on how the artist is less of an artist and his work mere clichés. What is subtle in this piece of comment is the deliberate avoidance of the content of the artwork: the actual meaning and intention of the work, its relation to the conditions that gave birth to it. . . the river of life. It is no wonder then that w4 came to be associated with priest or drunken madmen. Never are we looked upon as conscious and committed men and women who can carry the responsibility and the destiny of our country in our own hands.

May I go back or a

Secondly, we need no communist nor agitator to tell us to know and understand that we are oppressed and exploited; that all forms of protest are an expression that the people are agreed on searching for unity and resisting the racist regime. It is therefore basic that the artist is a sensitive being moved by this national grief and struggle of the community. . . the river that feeds and nourishes the work of art. Now we see that it is life around us (the socio-political and economic affairs) that actually determines us and our activities. The controversial question of form and content depends largely on the needs of the country at that moment. But in order that an artwork depicts an existing situation effectively it would be more of an advantage that the artist himself has gone through the relevant experience. One cultural activist once stated: ". . . To take part in the African revolution, it is not enough to write revolutionary songs; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves and of themselves"

One of the most effective weapons against our problems should be organisation and organising skill. But the supreme purpose for organising cannot be achieved without deep social or political awareness. Therefore awareness, in this context, implies the state of being organised; it denotes commitment and conviction; true political consciousness is the seed of collective spirit and democracy. What does true political consciousness mean to the artist in my country? We need to clearly popularise and give dignity to the just thoughts and deeds of the people. With our brushes and paints we shall need to visualise the beauty of the country we would like our people to live in. We therefore shall need to humble ourselves as to heed the people's Word. We need to learn the techniques of organisation and administration as this will be of help in the conducting of meetings, documentation of materials, works and information. This is the process will reward us with training to articulate ourselves to one another and to the world. We shall be able to read and account for our work with the clarity of the true revolutionary. This clarity will help us base our collectivity on a ¹⁹⁵⁵bellicose patriotism and a narrow and chauvanistic definition of ourselves. ". . . Revolution is a conscious act. It permits the unthinkable to be thought, the inconceivable to be imagined, and the unspoken to be shouted out loud. . . ."

It was in Medu Art Ensemble where the role of an artist concretised itself: the role of an artist is to learn; the role of an artist is to teach others; the role of an artist is to ceaselessly search for the ways and means of achieving freedom. Art cannot overthrow a government, but it can inspire change. In Medu Art Ensemble we explore the possibilities of our artforms in the context of our time, place and events. Secondly, we would like always to be able to do things out of need so that we can be clear as to our account of them. Therefore it was in Medu that the artist does things, consciously. . . the whole little ensemble is a workshop, a classroom, a jungle through which the people must carve out a ~~new~~ home. Thirdly, as the artist is involved with methods and materials, he is involved with himself or herself. We relearn to live again with one another. It is the culture we mean to help create.

In Medu we do not deal with principles but needs. We make posters to help popularise those events the people hold dear. We make postcards, calendars and we also organise gatherings to help explain the content of some dates of commemoration to

to those who would like to know. Most of our visuals are done by both the artists and members of the community we live in, and are done with simple but clear style and methods. The intention is to avail the skills to more people so that they can use them in their own communities. Secondly our intention is to communicate as immediately as possible and with more people all the time. This should explain the kind of issues we address ourselves to. In Medu we try hard to learn from the experiences of other people anywhere so that we relate them to our experiences in our countries of Southern Africa. With this definition of our role then as those who are workers in the field of culture, we found it important that we raise our voices hightto those who share the concerns of our people; to organise themxelves for resistance. This is the content of this conference today.

Without delaying the noble deliberations of this conference on Culture and RĒsistance in my country, I must however confess that it gives me pleasure to inform this conference of the growing death of Aparthied. A new generation of cultural workers growinginside and outside South Africa and is multiplying. Already their voice of Resistance is heard. It is for them and their wounded contrymen that this historic conference need to address itself to, inconncrete terms. How then does this gathering do this: the struggle of the artist in South Africa is rooted in that of the majority of his people. Therefore any actual engagement in the making of Change must of necessity seek inspiration and allience with the movement of the people.

Thank you.

Collection Name: MEDU ON-LINE

PUBLISHER:

Publisher: Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand

Location: Johannesburg

©2022

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice:

All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use:

Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of the Historical Papers Research Archive, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of the MEDU Art Ensemble Consolidation Project, Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.