

The last decade of apartheid art

DIANA KENTON gives a personal view of art and apartheid in the 80's. She believes that the social and political crisis which erupted in South Africa in the mid-1970s, and which continued to escalate in the 1980s, has been the broad context of the current debate about the role of the artist and writer in the struggle for change

THREE MAIN ISSUES have emerged out of the debate during the past two decades. Firstly, writers and artists focused on ways in which the arts could actively engage in the struggle for change; secondly, there was a growing exploration of working class culture and the many different forms of past black resis-

tance. This exploration was part of a new aesthetic that combined both urban and rural experience within the context of community life; thirdly, there was the need for artists to find effective ways of combating the devastating effects of censorship both on the creative and protest fronts.

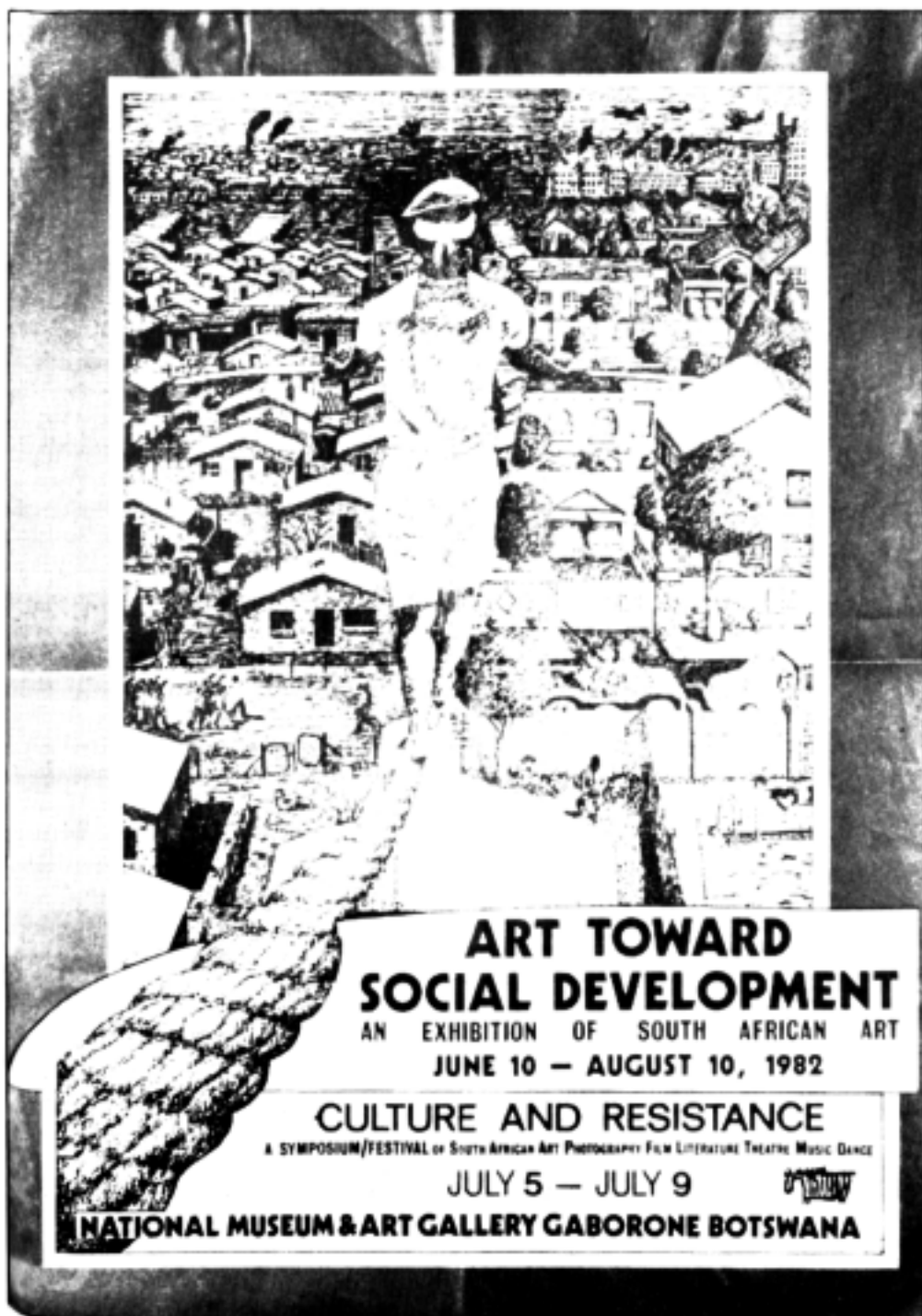
The notion of the artist-as-walking-a-tightrope between the realities of black and white South Africa was aptly portrayed in the poster by Gordon Metz for the Gaborone conference in 1982. Titled *Art Towards Social Development and Change in South Africa*, this conference called for a new functionalism in the arts. The poster depicts an artist poised as a unifying figure crossing a divided landscape. On the left, a township scene of shanties and box-housing provides a view of black resistance fermenting in a school playground against a horizon of gun smoke. On the right, white existence is identified by swimming pools, two cars in every driveway, armored vehicles and police vans on patrol, and, above the distant horizon of skyscrapers, the sky is filled with war planes.

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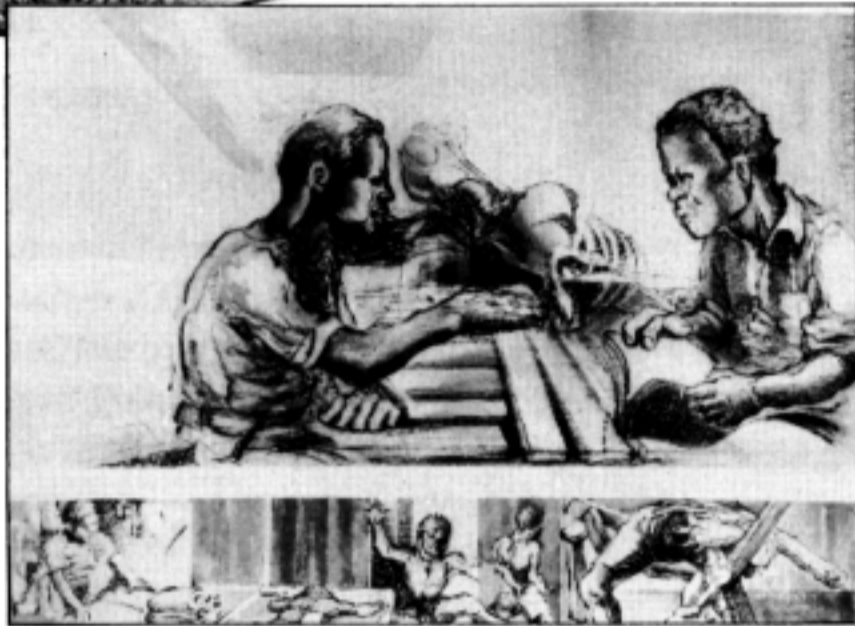
At the conference, Abdullah Ibrahim, explains that his position as an artist in the struggle is not one of exile but a 'voluntary strategic retreat'. In this role he does not regard himself as an artist in the commonly accepted sense of a creative 'individual', but as subservient to the need of his community to work for change. The graphic artist Thamsanqa Mnyele, said that professionals must take their place along with amateurs to create a dialogue and a message.

The conference was important for providing a common meeting ground for white and black cultural forces of liberation. Three years earlier, at the 1979 conference on *The State of Art in South Africa*, held in Cape Town, there had seemed to be no common ground. During the 1970s the belief then was that the way to political nationalism would be through cultural nationalism. While this strain of Black Consciousness was to be retained through the 1980s it became tempered by a much greater degree of co-operative solidarity between white and black artists during the decade.

At the Gaborone festival, the Junction Avenue Theater Company (JATC) demonstrated how workshops provided a meeting ground for the co-operation of black and



Left and below; pen and ink drawings by Thami Mnyele done for the Medu Arts Ensemble, Botswana



South African writing titled, *A People's Voice*, an exhibition of black South African art called *The Neglected Tradition* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery; Gavin Younge's book on *Art of the South African Townships* (1988); and Sue Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989).

Significantly, there has been a trend in the 1980s towards the exploration of new insights through formal means. Scholars have commented on this development in literature, while a similar trend in paintings such as by people like Mabaso and Koloane has roused controversy in art circles. The film *Mapantsula* likewise explores the growing political consciousness of a black gangster from a position outside black consciousness. A first of its kind, this film was banned in South Africa.

Some writers of the 1980s such as Mandla Langa, Lewis Nkosi and Njabulo Ndebele regard themselves as moving away from an overtly political and didactic mode. Mongane Serote's novel *To Every Birth Its Blood* is regarded as a significant milestone in the development of new formal means to portray the black experience. However, the urgency of the situation in South Africa, the crisis in the townships and the new state of emergency has taken its toll on the creative energies required to sustain such writing.

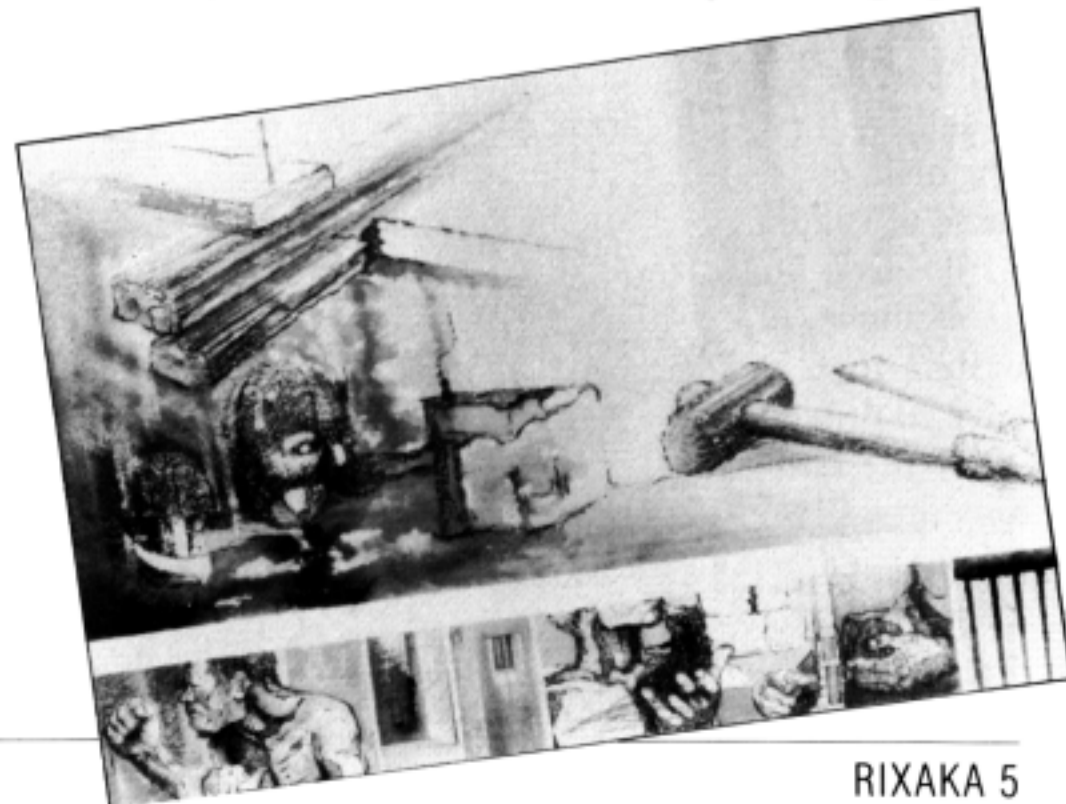
Under the circumstances it is not surprising to find that drama has remained the most popular mode of political expression during the eighties.

Perhaps, most significantly, the eighties will ultimately be seen as the decade of a new sense of cultural solidarity across old racial divides, united in the struggle for change. Looking back to the developments of the 1970s, with the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement and the loss of faith in the intentions of white liberalism, there seemed to be no way of bridging the

white artists. Whereas there had been disagreement during the 1970s over whether whites could express black feeling, the attitude at the Gaborone festival was more accepting of this possibility and saw it as mainly a question of talent and empathy. JATC explored aspects of the 1930s in the play *Marabi* in an attempt to shed light on events of the 1980s. In the play *Sophiatown* of 1986, the group provided an historical and social perspective about township life in the 1950s, the 'Age of Defiance'. The Company reconstructed an era that saw the changing role of the ANC, and the influence of literature, music, the New Journalism and the American lifestyles on life in Sophiatown prior to its systematic destruction by the regime.

The intentions behind this approach which has become a feature of the contemporary theater of resistance in the 1980s has been defined by RM Kavanagh who observes that: 'The new generation ... is learning the past and consciously and proudly claiming its culture and history. This is not simply a return to the past but a step forward to meet the problems of the future with the strength of the past.'

This process of relearning the past has spread across all the arts in the 1980s, shedding new lights on the depth and commitment of the black artist's struggle against oppression. From being on the fringe of white South African cultural awareness, the black artist's achievement has moved to the centre stage, recognised in the 1980s as a major force in the struggle for change. Towards the end of the 1980s a number of significant reappraisals had emerged in book and exhibition form. These included a seminal work by Piniel Shava on black





Protests against removals of people from Sophiatown to Meadowlands, photo from IDAF Above; a scene from the play 'Sophiatown', photo by Hampstead Theatre

yawning gulf. In 1983, on his his release from seven years in prison, Breyten Breytenbach reflected the views of the mid-seventies, the time of his arrest, when he said:

'It is an illusion to think you will be accepted by blacks as part of their struggle. That is a result of generations of apartheid. We fight out of guilt – blacks out of necessity. What ties us is the monstrous umbilical cord of apartheid.'

Ten years earlier, in 1973, Breytenbach had said that there was no hope for the survival of Afrikaans unless it was used in resistance. He explained the anomalous position of the Afrikaans writer against the turbulent era of the 1960s and the censorship laws that were being used to silence black protest. He said that it was not amazing that the

'the golden age of the Sixties, that time of harvesting our nice fat prizes and of wanting to fight to the bitter end about who should get the Hertzog Prize, that it coincided with a period when more and more unread, therefore non-existent, books by fellow South African authors were being banned?'

The main consequence of the bannings was an increasing sense of solidarity among all the writers in South Africa. Afrikaans is being used as part of the resistance struggle, for example, in the 1980s a new generation of Coloured writers such as Peter Snyders and Melvyn Whitebooi, have contributed major works in Afrikaans drama.

By the turn of the decade, a further spate of literary bannings – works by Gordimer, Brink, Matshoba and Leroux – caused a confrontation between writers and the authorities.

From the perspective of the 1980s it is possible to look back to the arrests, detentions and bannings of the

early 1960s through the 1970s and to trace the pattern of silence, reaction and adaptation which followed in the arts. Each successive wave of detentions and bannings has forced writers and artist to adopt new tactics, shifts in content and alternative approaches in style, form and delivery. Thus at the Gaborone conference, Nadine Gordimer spoke of the artist trying to break further frontiers of what is considered appropriate in the South African context.

The effects of censorship and repression set up a chain reaction in the arts. For example, detentions and bannings sent most of the black writers of the 1950s and 1960s into exile where they turned to autobiography. They found publishers abroad but faced a new crisis in being bereft of their audience. Most noteworthy of these are Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Bloke Modisane, Alex La Guma, William Keorapetse Kgositsile and Todd Matshikiza. In spite of the way some writers adapted, it was nevertheless clear that a great deal of the literary energy of the period had been lost.

The poetry of James Matthews, openly advocating the armed struggle, as appeared in *Cry Rage* was banned within a year after publication in 1972 as were his subsequent collections *Black Voices Shout* and *Pass Me the Meatballs, Jones*. As the political situation became more difficult for the less overt poets like Sanwe Nkondo, Zinjiva Nkondo, Mathe Diseko, Ilva MacKay, Serote, Langa and Ndebele, they too were forced to leave the country. In the fine arts, less vulnerable to restriction and banning, there developed in the 1960s a broad front of work concerned with the human condition. Emanating from the townships, this work broke new ground in its commitment to social issues. Louis Maqhubela emerged

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as one of the most sophisticated painters of this era, working in a lyrical and poetic manner. Landscape painting, in the form of township scenes, reflected conditions of squalor, overcrowding and daily life such as the soup kitchens painted by Ephraim Ngatane – a reality of poverty and despair unlike anything in the picturesque mode of white popular landscape visions. In this genre, Sekoto was followed by other township water colourists like Ngatane, Sihlali and Mogano. Together with Skotnes, Sidney Khumalo developed a sculptural approach based on African traditions. However, the decade leading up to the 1976 massacre of schoolchildren in Soweto became increasingly difficult for artists as for writers. Lionel Davis was imprisoned and Winston Saoli detained. Dumile Feni, Gavin Jantjies, Louis Maqhubela and Thamsanqa Mnyele, among the others, went into exile.

In contrast with the concerns of academia and white establishment artists preoccupied with 'identity' and 'high art' issues in the 1960s, were the examples of Skotnes with his Polly Street Art Centre and of self-confessed outsider, Bill Ainslie. Speaking from his own experience, Ainslie demonstrated how it was not only possible but necessary to cut through absolutist ideologies about art and 'South Africanness' 'accepting the present – with all its limitations and all its possibilities – as the area of action. This means resisting the conservative notion that only the past is meaningful, and it means resisting the progressive notion that redemption is essentially of the future and that until it happens we are impotent ...' Ainslie's workshop was an early example of one of the alternative ways in which the arts developed during the seventies and eighties in South Africa and of how ordinary people, outside the establishment, used art in vital ways to fight oppression. Other examples are CAP, Fuba, Caw etc. Bill Ainslie says:

'We stand between the pole of 'high art', which challenges all taste in its quest for the unconditioned act/work, and the pole of community – or grassroots – art, which recognises that all people are capable of authentic and vital expression. These poles are in a certain way paralleled by the demands of Ad Reinhardt for a New Academy, and the demands of Josef Beuys that all men be recognised as essentially creative.

'We also stand between the poles represented by the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg with its wealth and privilege, and Soweto – with its poverty and deprivation. Because we are essentially dependent on our paying students, we are working to help Fuba (Federated Union of Black Artists) with the establishment of its workshops in the central city and in the townships ...

'In the workshop we have people of all sorts, rich and poor, new and old, black and white, and it works. We watch people's lives changing and thereby changing ours; everybody contributes. We don't need 'political' art, or 'township' art, or 'relevant' art, or 'folk' art, or



Todd Matshikiza, photo from the Bailey Archives



Above; Gerard Sekoto with one of his works,
photo IDAF

Right; Self portrait by Dikobe Ben Martins

'African' art, or 'suburban' art, or 'township' art – it's all too self-conscious. What we need is to get on with the job of discovering ourselves, and let the labels be used by the ideologists.' (p80-87)

The newest front of action in the arts and a distinctive feature of the 1980s has been the popular resistance movement inspired by the ANC and led by the working classes inside South Africa. People's resistance was furthered in the 1980s by the grassroots community arts drive initiated by the Gaborone conference. Cultural groups proliferated, especially during 1987-88 when many organisations, including the United Democratic Front, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the Azanian People's Organisation, and the Unity Movement established cultural branches or 'desks'. At the same time non-professional drama groups were formed by workers for workers in industrial and municipal undertakings. For example, in 1988 the Unison Plays presented Peter Snyders' play *Die Drein* in public lounges and at municipal depots. Similarly, the Cape Flats Players first aimed at taking theater to the community, trying to conscientise the workers and educate them on theater. 'Now we have moved further.' From the community, these informal groups have extended their

influence outwards at festivals and professional venues. Thus the Sarmcol Workers presented their play *The Long March* in England as guests of the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

'The workers' play *The Long March*, devised by striking union members from the Sarmcol factory at Howick (a subsidiary of the British Tyre and Rubber Company), shows through a combination of Brechtian techniques, dance, mime and much humour, the story of their eighteen-month strike over the issue of union recognition. Most of the dialogue and songs are in Zulu.' (Gunner 1988 p231)

While oratory, song and dance have long been important vehicles for political expression in black culture, the expansion in the use of the visual arts on a wide popular basis was new. Murals, peace parks, billboards, posters, graffiti, and T-shirts spread a daily message of resistance. (Williamson 1989; Sack 1989) State attempts to suppress this threat, as with the performing arts, became an ever increasing measure of its effectiveness in the struggle. In May 1988, at a state-sponsored arts conference in Stellenbosch, the then Minister of Education FW de Klerk, warned against the threat of 'peoples art' and the role of groups that propagated it in the 'total onslaught'. As the 1980s unfolded, so the content of the various arts reflected new subject matter.

'Underlying almost everything written in Afrikaans today ... is an intimation of violence and death.

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whether portrayed as an intensely private experience ... or directly linked to apartheid or the South African military experience ... or examined as an inescapable part of human experience ... In one form it emerges as a series of relentless explorations of war, conscription, border skirmishes, incursions into neighbouring territories, the invasion of privacy ... More generally, it is expressed as an intimation of apocalypse, which implies not just death of the individual or the end of his hopes, but the destruction of the entire known world or a way of life.' (Brink and Coetzee 1986 p13)

Since 1981 when Paul Herzberg's play *Sweet Like Suga* was first performed in London, there have been at least 20 other plays, in English and Afrikaans, both in South Africa and abroad, dealing with one or other aspect of conscription and life in the SADF (South African Defence Force).

Anthony Akerman's play *Somewhere on the Border* (1983), explores sexual and social aspects of life in the SADF as metaphors for contemporary political and cultural mores in South Africa. The play was banned in book form but not for performance. However, two of the actors were beaten up after the start of the play's run at the Alexander Theater in Johannesburg in February 1987, and performances had to be cancelled. Already, in June 1986, state attempts to silence criticism of the military in South Africa had been promulgated as part of the second phase of emergency regulations. It became an offence to make any statement that discredits or undermines the system of compulsory military service.

The destruction of a known way of life and intimations of apocalypse in the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), presents JM Coetzee's deep psychological involvement with the historic landscape of civil war in South Africa. It marks for the South African novel in English, a new highpoint in the line of anti-colonial writing, established by Olive Schreiner, asserting the alien nature of European culture in the South African landscape and exploring its demise.

As South Africans enter the 1990s, it would seem that the debate on the role of the artist continues to be inextricably involved with issues of a political nature. Coetzee's intimations of an alternative consciousness rising out of the ashes of apartheid society in a landscape fraught with contradictions provides food for thought even though it cannot provide a conclusion.

Works cited

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