

1970s Rebirth



Above: *Untitled*, Thami Mnyele, 1976, drawing from exhibition "A New Day", published with review in *Staffrider*, April 1980

The apartheid regime silenced the resistance of the 1950s with force. But, less than a decade later, the resistance movement began to find its feet. A black student, Steve Biko, began to talk of reasserting the voice of the black majority, of recognising, and then vocalising, their needs and wishes. His words found fertile ground with black students and young intellectuals; with poets, playwrights, musicians; and with the visual artists.

Black Consciousness (BC) bred a new attitude towards black and African culture and ideas and communities.

'Of the major aims of this group, the following stand immediately out: to uplift Black life and present it through our own eyes: to interpret ourselves; to negate the slave mentality concept that a Black man is good ONLY if a White man says so, in fact to prove the opposite to this time-worn "norm"; to highlight the works of Black writers and to expose irrelevant racisms of the Shakespeares and others; to believe in ourselves, and much more, to say we are proud and Black!' (Molefe Pheto)¹

The broad principles underlying the BC cultural movement were:

- express yourself, produce work about your own community, your own experiences;
- use your community's styles and traditions of expression, your people's artistic and cultural vocabulary;
- define your audience as your community — look at who your message is written for, who actually receives it.

This wave of resistance culture swelled first in the circles of theatre, poetry, and creative writing, and spread from there to the visual arts. As Lionel Davis commented decades later:

'Black Consciousness made us realise the power of the painted word — the power of culture in the people's struggle.'⁴

Matsamela Manaka reflected on the impact of this emerging resistance on his generation of artists in his seminal book *Echoes of South African Art*:

'African artists were made to relate more and more to the socio-political situation with a certain degree of political awareness. Unlike some artists who were pre-occupied with the search for an African idiom whose concern, to some extent, was an African style, the Black Consciousness artists were more concerned with the content of their work.'⁵

"Say it Loud, I'm black and proud! this is fast becoming our modern culture. A culture of defiance, self-assertion, and group pride and solidarity."

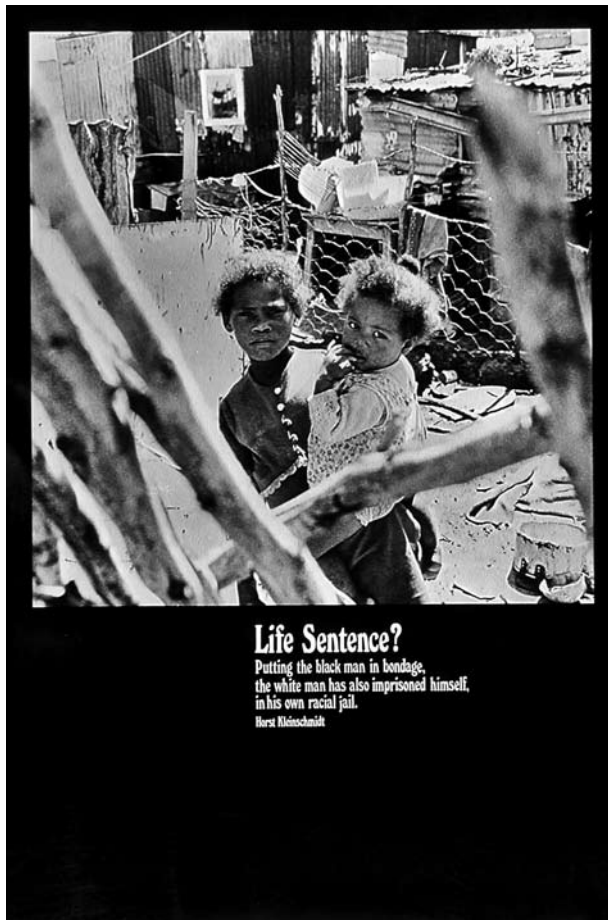
Molefe Pheto, Medu Newsletter, June 1979²

"I am dealing with the consciousness of my own people. I am not dealing with the consciousness of other people. I have my audiences as my people."

poet Maishe Maponye³



Graphic from *The Night Keeps Winking*, drawn by Thami Mnyele, 1982, Gaborone, Botswana



Two of a series of posters
produced by SPRO-
CAS, circa 1972, artist
unknown, No. 3572

The visual arts of Black Consciousness

By the closing years of the 1960s, Black Consciousness became widespread among students in the non-white schools and tertiary institutions. Thami Mnyele commented that he 'moved with the youth in the South African Students' Organisation (SASO)'; Charles Nkosi, at Rorke's Drift, had been a schoolmate of theology student Steve Biko. This awareness rapidly found its expression in the arts — arts, poetry, theatre, and music.

In contrast to the gallery scene, artists using other art forms — theatre, music, dance, poetry — found ways to speak more directly to their own audiences, to their own people. Poet Maishe Maponya put it directly: 'I am dealing with the consciousness of my own people. I'm not dealing with the consciousness of other people. I have my audiences as my people.'

Mhloti Black Theatre started in Alexandra township in 1971. It provided a platform for cultural workers in every field to work through what the concept of culture meant to them and to their community, including artists Thami Mnyele and Percy Sedumedi. One of the founders of Mhloti Black Theatre, Molefe Pheto, described its conception succinctly:

'From time immemorial, Black talent in South Africa was white-produced, white-directed, and even white-owned! The result was a misrepresentation in the arts of what Black life and Black theatre was all about. Its aspirations, desires and wishes ... everything that was negative was Black. On top of the above humiliations, the Black man was shamelessly and shamefully exploited. Mhloti Black Theatre emerged because of and as a result of this muck. To fight and to begin the eradication of it for all eternity.'⁶

But Mhloti Black Theatre brought Thami Mnye, for one, to question the role of art and culture in his society. He asked why the great township musicians of the 1950s – people such as Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Kingforce Silgee, Dollar Brand, Zakes Nkosi – provided hope to the community, while artists in the early 1970s seemed trapped in 'conversation centred around the unfairness and the exploitation of the artists by art galleries, recording companies, publishing houses and how biased art critics and the editors were towards the artists' works' ⁷. In 1972, Thami left Alex for Rorke's Drift, to hone his skills in the visual arts.

Political media and anti-apartheid awareness

From the increasingly disruptive actions of militant students, anti-apartheid awareness moved into open resistance.

From 1969 to 1973, the Study Project on Christianity in Apartheid Society (SPRO-CAS) produced a series of reports on apartheid, sponsored by the Christian Institute and the South African Council of Churches. The role of SPRO-CAS in the early 1970s underlines the place of the progressive Christian Church in challenging the injustices under apartheid. This commitment is reflected in the graphics that emerged. The deep roots of liberation theology in South Africa merged with commitment to and support for the struggle, thereby contributing Christian imagery and symbolism to the emerging political graphics.

In 1972, the SPRO-CAS Project went beyond reporting on apartheid to initiating 'a project for social change', with young theology student Bantu Steve Biko playing a key role.

'Spro-Cas II was structured into a Black Community Programme (BCP) by Bennie Khoapa and Steve Biko, and a social change programme, aimed primarily at whites and directed by former student activists such as Neville Curtis and Horst Kleinschmidt'.⁸

The transformed SPRO-CAS published 'provocative posters intended to arouse white consciences to serious studies of national issues like migrant labour'.⁹ The BCP initiated a publishing programme, including books of essays by Steve Biko and Njabulo Ndebele.

SPRO-CAS printed material at the Christian Institute, on an old Heidelberg offset machine bought with funds donated by German churches. The printer was long-standing community activist Joe Setlabogo (whose political roots were in the PAC); Thami Mnye worked with him as illustrator for SACHED school texts. Together they encouraged a range of community groups to bring them a range of print jobs 'on the side'. In 1980, printer Kevin Humphrey (previously an activist working with graphics in Durban and Cape Town) joined them. They were joined by Mzwake Nthlabatsi and soon after this Thami Mnye went into exile.

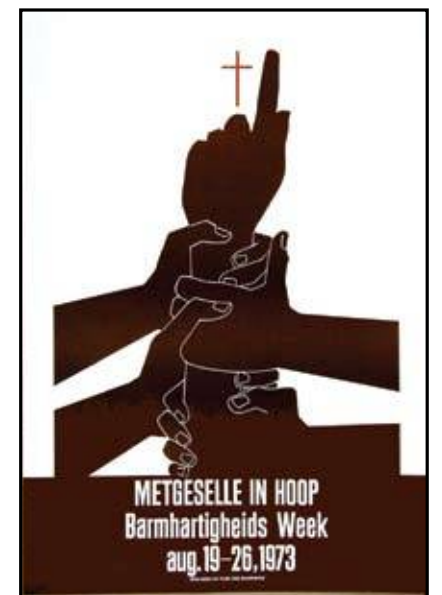
The banning of Steve Biko in 1973, combined with a growing demand for publications, led to the creation of a separate publishing house, Ravan Press. Within its first two years, two of Ravan's published books were banned.

The first Director of Ravan Press, Peter Randall, commented later:

'The security police were understandably rather confused by the links between Ravan, Spro-Cas, The Programme for Social Change, and the Christian Institute ... and tended to see all these as merely the different heads of the same godless, leftist monster'.¹⁰



I was hungry, silkscreen, circa 1974, artist unknown. No. 83



Metgeselle in Hoop, artist unknown, for Interchurch Aid, Braamfontein Johannesburg 1973. No. 3616

The police banned four SPRO-CAS posters that attacked apartheid. Wopko Jensma's book, *Where White is the Colour and Black is the Number*, became the fourth Ravan Press title banned within Ravan's first two years (in 1975). Peter Randall responded to government attacks: 'If the apartheid state charged us under the Act with harming race relations, it would be a grotesque irony.'¹¹

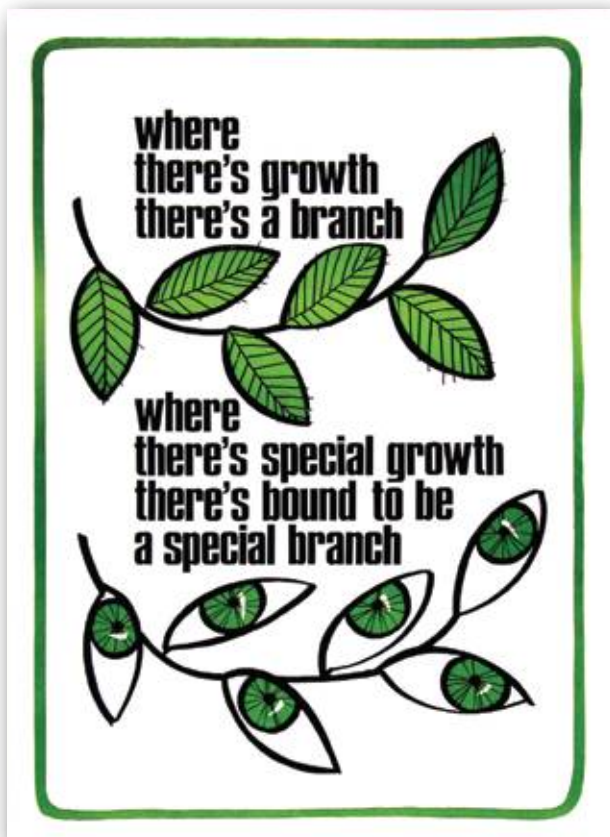
Rebirth of mass action

Parallel to the cultural awakening that swept through South Africa's townships in the early 1970s, there was a political rebirth throughout the subcontinent. Mass strikes, organised through newly formed but still illegal black trade unions, erupted in Natal in 1973, and spread throughout the country within weeks. At least 12 striking mineworkers were killed by police at Carletonville on the Rand (according to official figures). Further feeding this spirit of resistance, freedom fighters in the liberation wars in neighbouring Mozambique and Angola won their countries in 1975. The white governments in Rhodesia and South West Africa faced guerilla attack; the 'comfort zone' of white control around South Africa's borders was crumbling.

White students and the art of rejection

On the white university campuses, some students discovered they were unhappy with the roles apartheid's rulers expected them to adopt. Some found their place handing out leaflets supporting worker strikes and boycotts, demonstrating against the university administrations, and organising protests against conscription into apartheid's army.

Franco Frescura did illustrations and cartoons for the *Wits Student* newspaper for 18 months in 1971-73: 'My own ideal choice was not to pick up a gun, but to



Special Branch, artist unknown, Wits students' workshop, Johannesburg 1975



Above: *Best of Wits Students*, artist Franco Frescura, Wits Student, 1973. MTN col.

hit at what they (the powers that be) value most: personal dignity and reputation.' They saw this as rebellion: 'At one point, they refused to let me travel through (the Transkei), saying "in view of the fact that you are a cartoonist, we cannot let you into homeland areas".¹² Frescura was rusticated for a publication of the collection of cartoons he had done for Wits Student.

Kevin Humphrey, working on the student newspaper at University of Natal in Durban in 1972, recalls a similar attitude: 'We just ignored censorship; we made it as outrageous as possible, sent the first copy to the Security Police. We'd be disappointed if we were not banned'.¹³

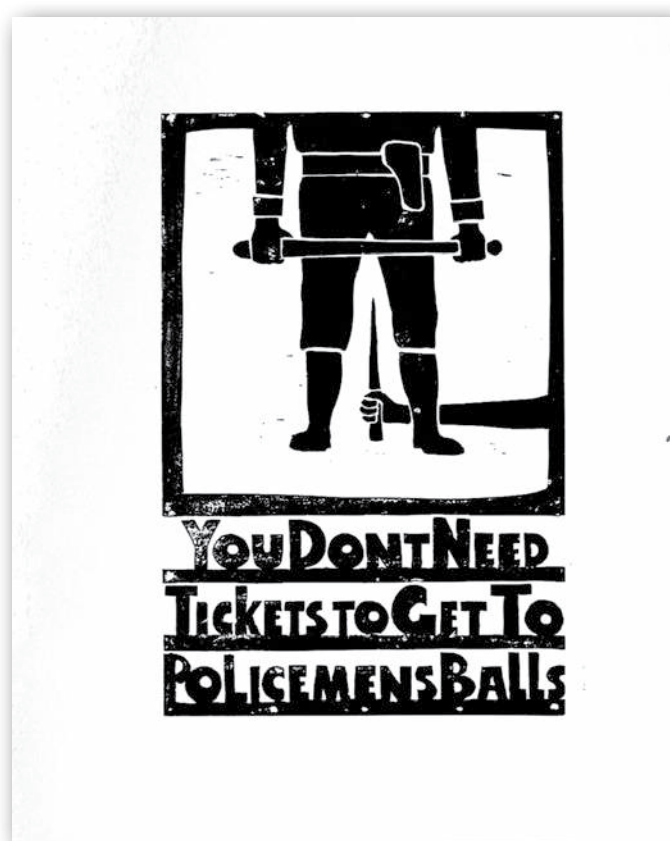
Mozambican Carlos Cardoso was a student at Wits who did 'go too far'. According to Franco Frescura, Cardoso produced a graphic showing Vorster's head in a urinal; Frescura was expelled for publishing the graphic, and Cardoso was subsequently deported from South Africa. (Cardoso was assassinated in Mozambique in 2002.)¹⁴

Through the student organisation, Aquarius, rebellious students planted crosses on the Wits University library lawn to commemorate Sharpeville. Still later, they clogged the lawn with tents to symbolise rejection of the apartheid military. They invited black poets such as Don Mattera and Sipho Sepamla to read poetry to them. But this was all in contrast to, not an extension of, their artistic training.¹⁵

'Thinking about it now, putting my student energy into Aquarius was in part to escape the very conservative art (in the Wits art department) ... The Aquarius stuff fed me emotionally; the fine art department made me feel battered, exhausted, tired. Nothing gave me inspiration there. I don't know, though, if I thought it through at the time. The outside world had no impact on the Wits art department. We were not looking at it'.¹⁶



Below: *God Rest ye Merry Gentlemen*, Franco Frescura, Wits, 1973. No. 3107



Policemen's Balls, Franco Frescura, Wits students, Silkscreen, 1973. MTN col.

By the mid-1970s, a number of UCT art students also began to experiment with making posters and graphics away from their classes. Trish de Villiers describes a major influence in the later community arts structures as coming from people who were:

'... white, almost overwhelmingly middle class, many of them women, emerging from the Michaelis School of Art and drawn to the project for more or less coherent political reasons.' ¹⁷

These activists included John Berndt, Emile Maurice (who was formally studying silk screening at the university), Kay Hassan, Peter MacAllister, and Gordon Metz. They were joined by Manfred Zylla, a graphic artist and commercial printer from Germany, and Kevin Humphrey, who moved from Durban to Cape Town, working there as a commercial printer for a few years. Trish de Villiers maintains that –

'... what was shared by the grouping, in the main, was a language and a set of values arising from an education in the visual arts – for the most part liberal, internationalist and forcefully Eurocentric.' ¹⁸

'Aesthetics is bull-shit'

A number of these people, most likely in reaction to the approaches and aesthetics promoted in their formal fine arts classes, denied that their graphic protest should be considered 'art' at all. It rather constituted a loud and sometimes rude statement of their dissatisfaction.

John Berndt recalls that in Michaelis in the mid-1970s, many artists 'were unwilling to make the connection between leaving their artistic ivory tower and the arts'. He himself viewed making posters for trade unions as a rebellion against 'fine art', not an extension of it; he eventually was expelled from Michaelis in 1976. ¹⁹

Franco Frescura was more blunt: 'I held the position that "Aesthetics is Bullshit" – which upset guys in the Department of Fine Arts (at Wits)'. He was kicked out of Wits art school. ²⁰

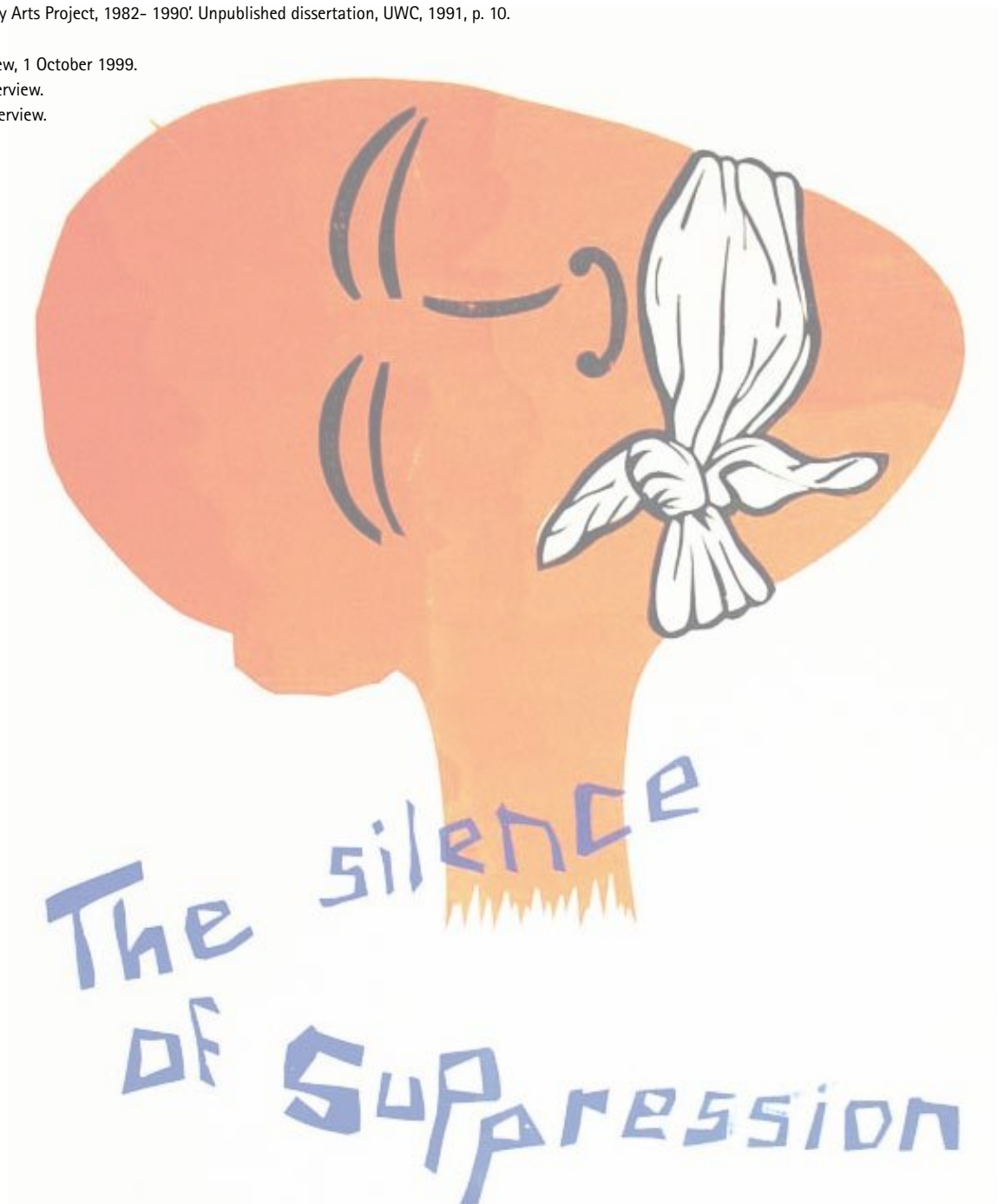
Kevin Humphrey went further in his perceptions:

'I committed class suicide and went to join the printing industry; I thought I was joining the workers. I became an apprentice to a big repro company, and got the technical skills for printing....' ²¹

By 1975, one might distinguish two distinct trends in resistant visual arts: on the one hand, imagery nourished by the flowering of Black Consciousness, and on the other, the strident and confrontational discontent of white university students. It took the pressures of the 1976 uprising and repression to bring these two dynamics onto common ground.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Molefe Pheto, Medu Newsletter, 1(2), June 1979, Gaborone, p. 41.
- 2 *ibid.* p. 41.
- 3 Maishe Maponya, A man with a conscience, SABC film, 1996.
- 4 Lionel Davis, Interview, November 1999.
- 5 Matsemela Manaka, Echoes of African Art, p. 16.
- 6 Molefe Pheto, Medu Newsletter, 1(2), June 1979, Gaborone, p. 41.
- 7 Thami Mnyele, Observations on the state of the contemporary visual arts in South Africa, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 8 G.E. de Villiers (Ed.), Ravan Twenty-five Years (1972-1997): A Commemorative Volume of New Writing. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1997, p.3.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.7.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 12 Franco Frescura, Interview, 5 November 1999, Pretoria.
- 13 Kevin Humphrey, Interview, 3 November, 1999, Johannesburg.
- 14 Franco Frescura, Interview.
- 15 Ruth Sacks, Interview, November 1999, Johannesburg.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Trish de Villiers, 'Cultural work in an era of severe repression and mass resistance: the case of the Media Project at Community Arts Project, 1982- 1990'. Unpublished dissertation, UWC, 1991, p. 10.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 John Berndt, Interview, 1 October 1999.
- 20 Franco Frescura, Interview.
- 21 Kevin Humphrey, Interview.



The silence of
Suppression. No.
3109