



## Culture is a weapon of struggle

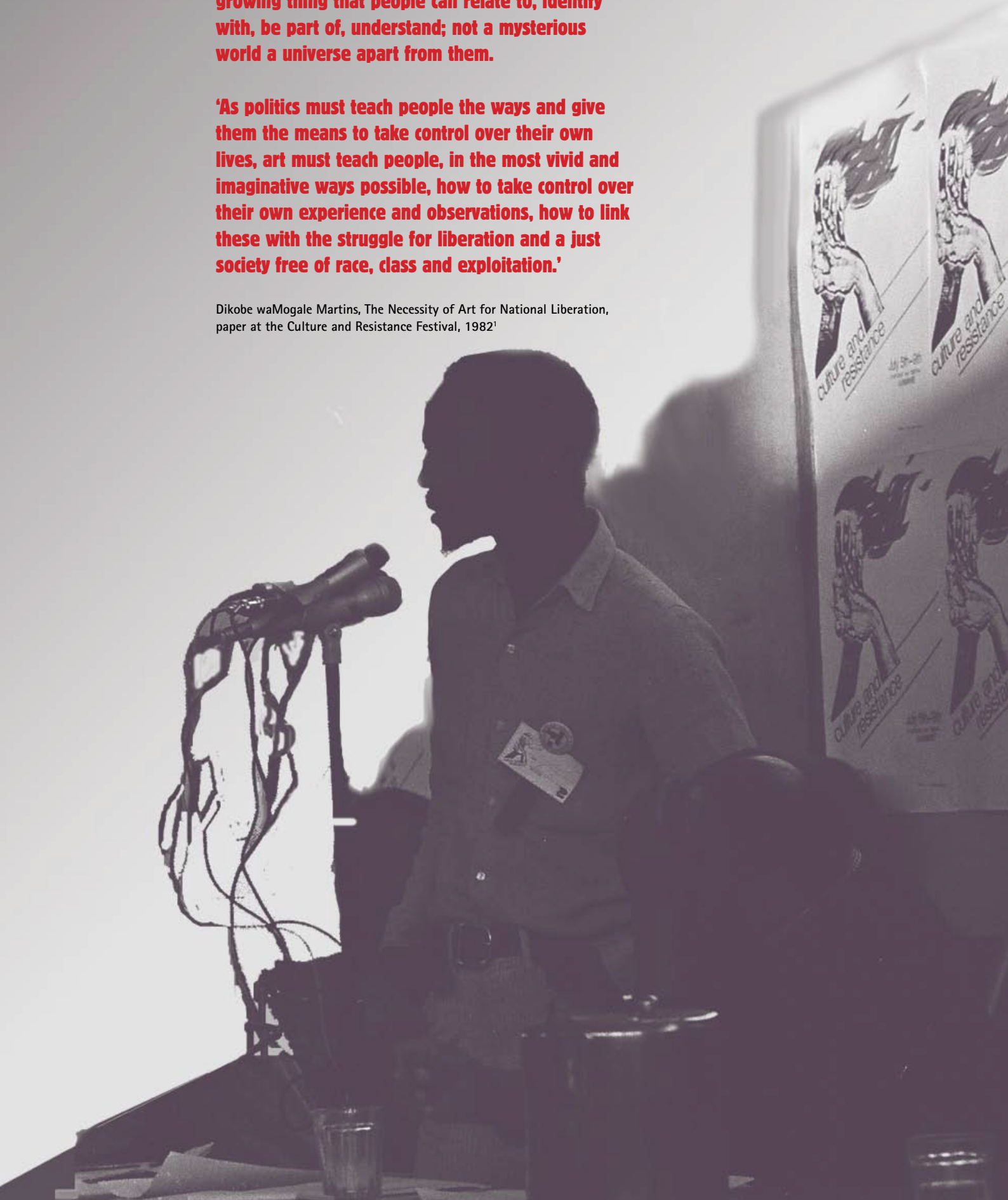


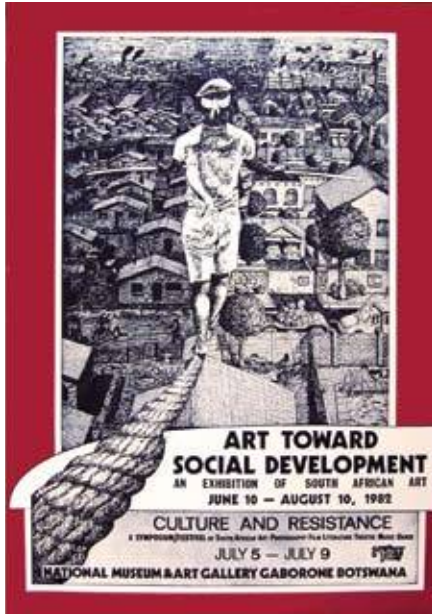
*Culture and Resistance*, logo on poster, artist Thami Mnyele, silkscreened by Medu, 1982. JS col.

**'Our Art must become a process — a living, growing thing that people can relate to, identify with, be part of, understand; not a mysterious world a universe apart from them.'**

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

Dikobe waMogale Martins, The Necessity of Art for National Liberation, paper at the Culture and Resistance Festival, 1982<sup>1</sup>





*Art towards Social Development* poster, designed and drawn by Thami Mnyele and Gordon Metz, litho, Medu, Gaborone, 1982.  
No. 2852

People and organisations engaged in arts and culture structures within the South African democratic movement came together in 1982 in a conference in Gaborone, Botswana. The cultural conference and arts exhibition, respectively titled the 'Culture and Resistance Festival', and the 'Art for Social Development' exhibition, hosted by Medu Art Ensemble, brought together about 2000 people, mostly from South Africa. It took two years to organise the conference and exhibition.

In South Africa a number of cultural groups and organisations, including Ravan Press, FUBA, CAP and Open School co-operated to set up steering committees to collect together cultural workers and to enable them to contribute their work: paintings, graphics, sculptures, photographs, films, plays, poems and music to these events.<sup>2</sup>

Thami Mnyele chaired the conference; artist and poet, Dikobe WaMogale Martins, took on the task of national organiser inside South Africa. The exhibition was curated by a number of leading artists, including David Koloane in Johannesburg and Emile Maurice in Cape Town. Dikobe set out the exhibition's aims:

'The theme of the exhibition is "Art towards Social Development", and it reflects the constant battle among cultural workers to find a place for themselves in society which is not merely that of light entertainers, but one of making an important contribution to the development of society.

'... it is hoped that this exposure, experience and effort will lead to greater co-operation and collective work among cultural workers in South Africa in the years ahead, with the aim of heightening the level of culture in South Africa and to encourage cultural workers to be part and parcel of the communities from which they come.'<sup>3</sup>

Lionel Davis describes his involvement, not then specifically as a graphic artist, but rather as a committed cultural worker:

'In 1982 we went to the Botswana Festival – I went with the CAP mime unit. At that time, CAP had gone through a bad patch. Emile Maurice and Manfred Zylla were asked to do Cape Town for Medu. Is Moss and I organised the bus to go to the Medu festival. The call at the festival was for sharing arts training with the community.'<sup>4</sup>

Manfred Zylla recalls the labour of organising the project: the work of the CAP theatre group and Amampondo that began in the lead-up to the festival, the work that went into collecting artworks for the exhibition, hundreds of meetings.<sup>5</sup> Busloads arrived in Gaborone.

'"It was the most exciting time – so outrageous", recalls Reedwaan Vally. "We hitched up and took the train part of the way. A subversive time – meeting all these people, engaging in all these conversations.'<sup>6</sup>

From the Botswana perspective:

'We were standing around on the (University of Botswana) campus just as it was getting dark, wondering if this conference was really going to happen. There was a rumour the buses had been stopped by the police at the border; the border closed at six. Then these buses pulled up, and out came all these exhausted, dusty, excited people, after twenty hours moving on a bus from Cape Town, and a nervous time held up at the border. Some carried instruments and sleeping bags. Bachana Mokwena (an exiled poet and student activist) was supposed to be acting as guard at the door of the main student union hall where people were to gather; he was standing on a chair at the entrance waving a coke bottle and shouting: "Welcome to the liberated zone!"'<sup>7</sup>



The conference crystallised the attitudes towards culture that had grown up in township and community arts structures over the past few years. Thami Mnye, in the opening speech for the exhibition, said:

'The theme of this exhibition is ART TOWARD SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, but I must hasten to ask, what art? Whose social development? The act of creating art is not different from the act of building a bridge – it is the work of many hands. Therefore art is social, so are the other art forms like writing, theatre, and music and so on. This means that art is part and parcel of the rules and laws which govern societies. So, the fact that in South Africa the majority of the people are engaged in a struggle for liberation, means that art and cultural workers cannot be divorced from this process.

'If we look around us, we realise that we are confronted with various points of dealing with the same kind of reality. In some works we see a dangerous sense of fear and despair, whereas in some other pictures we are strengthened by the optimism and hopefulness.

'It is this element of optimism and hopefulness, which has brought us all together tonight; it is this indestructible and enduring spirit of struggle that nourishes our quest for social development and justice.'<sup>8</sup>

Dikobe waMogale Martins outlined the issues:

'Our culture under apartheid is a contested culture – a culture afflicted by oppression and exploitation – a culture of people dying daily of malnutrition and starvation in reserves, now called resettlement camps and at times homelands – a culture of black children being shot by policemen and of adults dying of unknown "natural causes" in detention.

'Artists will have to face up to and challenge the prevailing power structure, by raising the levels of consciousness, by expanding the boundaries of visual



Detail of poster made for Hugh Masekela band based upon sketches of musicians playing at the Gaborone Culture and Resistance festival; portraits include Masekela, Duke Makesi, Zack Nkosi, Steve Dyer, Kleintjie Rubushe, and Kingforce Silljee. By Thami Mnye, for Medu, Gaborone, 1984. JS col.

and conceptual experience. This is one function of the creative imagination, amongst others, and in this lies a unique power: (1) the power to pose alternatives, and to induce people to think; (2) the power to combat the specific form that cultural apartheid takes within the sphere of artistic production and in cultural apartheid in general; (3) the power to look at the dominant ideology of the ruling class critically and expose its real function; that of exploitation, discrimination, and oppression, and thereby to assist the people's struggle.

'These tasks are interrelated. The need for the development of a national art becomes self-evident.'<sup>9</sup>

And print maker Gavin Jantjies was one of many who clarified the framework:

'... I cannot begin to argue the "art for art's sake" argument in a situation where children are being shot and killed for protesting at injustice. Any South African artist who dares to uphold this argument as relevant for South African culture, only demonstrates his utter disrespect for our dead, and a certain shallowness in the understanding of our culture.'<sup>10</sup>

Or, as poet Keorapetse Kgositse put it:

'We are not interested in how it is to be an artist, if the artist is finally interested in fooling around with paints and brushes or in perverse juggling with words while he contemplates his next royalty cheque or how he is going to mesmerise his liberal patrons at the next exhibition or book party. We are interested in how it is to be alive. And what or how is it to be alive today? Fascist tyranny and barbarism is a reality that even the most limp-minded need not be reminded of. To be fired with the spirit of freedom, to be determined to fight and destroy that tyranny, to usher a new chapter of life where there is peace, progress and happiness - this we see as our mission, our duty, our ultimate responsibility.'<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, it was emphasised that this approach towards artwork forces the artists to strengthen their skills, creativity, and ability, rather than produce quick and easy political points. Dikobe quoted Brecht:

'In 1935 Communist poet Bertold Brecht wrote an essay entitled "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties". In it he states: "Nowadays, anyone who wishes to combat lies and ignorance and to write the truth must overcome at least five difficulties. He must have the courage to write the truth when the truth is everywhere opposed; the keenness to recognise it, although it is everywhere concealed; the skill to manipulate it as a weapon; the cunning to spread it amongst the people, and the judgment to select those in whose hands it will be effective. These are formidable problems for a writer living under Fascism, but they exist also for those writers who have fled or have been exiled; they exist even for writers working in countries where civil liberties prevail!"<sup>12</sup>

We should also, perhaps, underline that 'Culture as a Weapon of Struggle' never suggested that culture was the only weapon of struggle - a misconception summed up by one activist twenty years later, looking at a movie about 'struggle music': 'It seems we sang and danced, and apartheid collapsed'. At the Culture and Resistance Festival, Dikobe said bluntly:

'It should be clear now that the artist cannot content him or herself with art practice only, for it can never be a substitute for political practice; for it is impossible to make a revolution with drawings, paintings, and sculptures only, no matter how progressive they may be.'<sup>13</sup>



## Cultural boycott

The conference called on the rest of the world for a boycott of apartheid culture. Since the 1950s, the ANC had lobbied internationally for boycotts of apartheid society — in culture, sport, academia, in military weapons, and in economics. Boycott action had become a tactic used consistently by community groups in struggles in the early 1980s. The Medu conference resolutions reinforced, expanded, and boosted the tactic of boycott action to cover the arena of culture.

'Boycott action is a weapon of oppressed and exploited people. It is a kind of action that has a long history among the oppressed majority in South Africa. Unlike strike action, boycott action is primarily community based, i.e. workers, students, church groups, cultural groups, etc, take part simultaneously. Furthermore, boycott action has a two-fold objective; first, a short-term objective in that it is an act against an immediate and passing event, or part of an immediate boycott campaign; second, a long-term objective in that it is a means through which a community can test its unity in action, learn the skills of organising and develop a sense of achievement by scoring victories against the oppressors.'<sup>14</sup>

Gavin Jantjies spelt out the position for enforcing a boycott against apartheid-supporting culture:

'The sphere of international art exchange has ignored the black artist on the grounds that they don't know who we are and that we are not up to international standards. This does not exclude the South African National Gallery from being invited to offer work to various international biennales. The jurisdiction on whose work gets shown at international level takes place within this government institution. If racialism in sport has been successfully campaigned against, has the time not come to fight racism in art? This is a task we should acknowledge.

'All foreign groups and individuals, whether sporting or cultural, who are directly or indirectly invited or encouraged by the racist regime or its allies must be boycotted. Such visits by foreign groups or individuals must never lend credibility to the status of the regime.

'Social groups, individuals, and institutions directly or indirectly aided by the government or linked to the regime in any way must be likewise boycotted, both inside South Africa and internationally. The regime must never be able to achieve favourable publicity for itself through Bantustans or "Republic day festivities" or internationally through Big Tates, O'Jays or Ipi-Tombis.'<sup>15</sup>



*Don't Entertain  
Apartheid, designed  
Judy Seidman,  
Medu, litho print,  
1982. No. 882*



### The way forward: mobilising people's art

The Visual Arts discussion group in the conference agreed that progressive artists within South Africa should work together to produce graphics and artwork in support of the liberation movement. Specifically, they established silk screen groups to produce publicity for people's organisations – including trade unions, civics, student organisations, and progressive religious bodies.

The conference also reaffirmed the strong cultural links between those artists in exile and people developing a culture of resistance to apartheid inside South Africa.

Activists went home to South Africa affirmed: in their art, in their resistance, in their collective response. And the results were immediate: 'After culture and resistance people started to work more closely together, more active', commented Manfred Zylla.<sup>16</sup> The impact showed specifically in the establishment of structures dedicated to poster-making: notably, the CAP Production Unit, and the Silkscreen Training Project in Johannesburg.



Untitled graphic by Thami Mnye, pen and ink, Gaborone, 1984 (intended as a backdrop for Amandla Cultural Ensemble). A coloured version of this picture, jointly completed with J Seidman, was in portfolio taken by security police after Gaborone raid in 1985. MTN, JS cols.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Dikobe waMogale Martins, 'The Necessity of Art for National Liberation.' Paper presented at Culture and Resistance Festival, 1982, p.3.
- 2 Medu editorial board, background information paper, Culture and Resistance conference, mimeographed, Medu, Gaborone, 1982.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lionel Davis interview.
- 5 Manfred Zylla interview.
- 6 Reedwaan Vally interview.
- 7 JS personal reminiscence.
- 8 Thami Mnyele, Opening speech at 'Art for Social Development' Exhibition, p.1.
- 9 Dikobe waMogale Martins, Necessity of Art for National Liberation, p.1
- 10 Gavin Jantjies, Paper on Fine Art, Culture and Resistance Symposium, p.8.
- 11 Keropatshe Kgotsitsile, Paper Culture and Resistance Symposium, p.5.
- 12 Dikobe waMogale Martins, The Necessity of Art for National Liberation, p.3.
- 13 Ibid, p.3.
- 14 Medu Statement to Culture and Resistance Conference.
- 15 Gavin Jantjies, Paper on Fine Art, Culture and Resistance Symposium, p.10.
- 16 Manfred Zylla interview.

