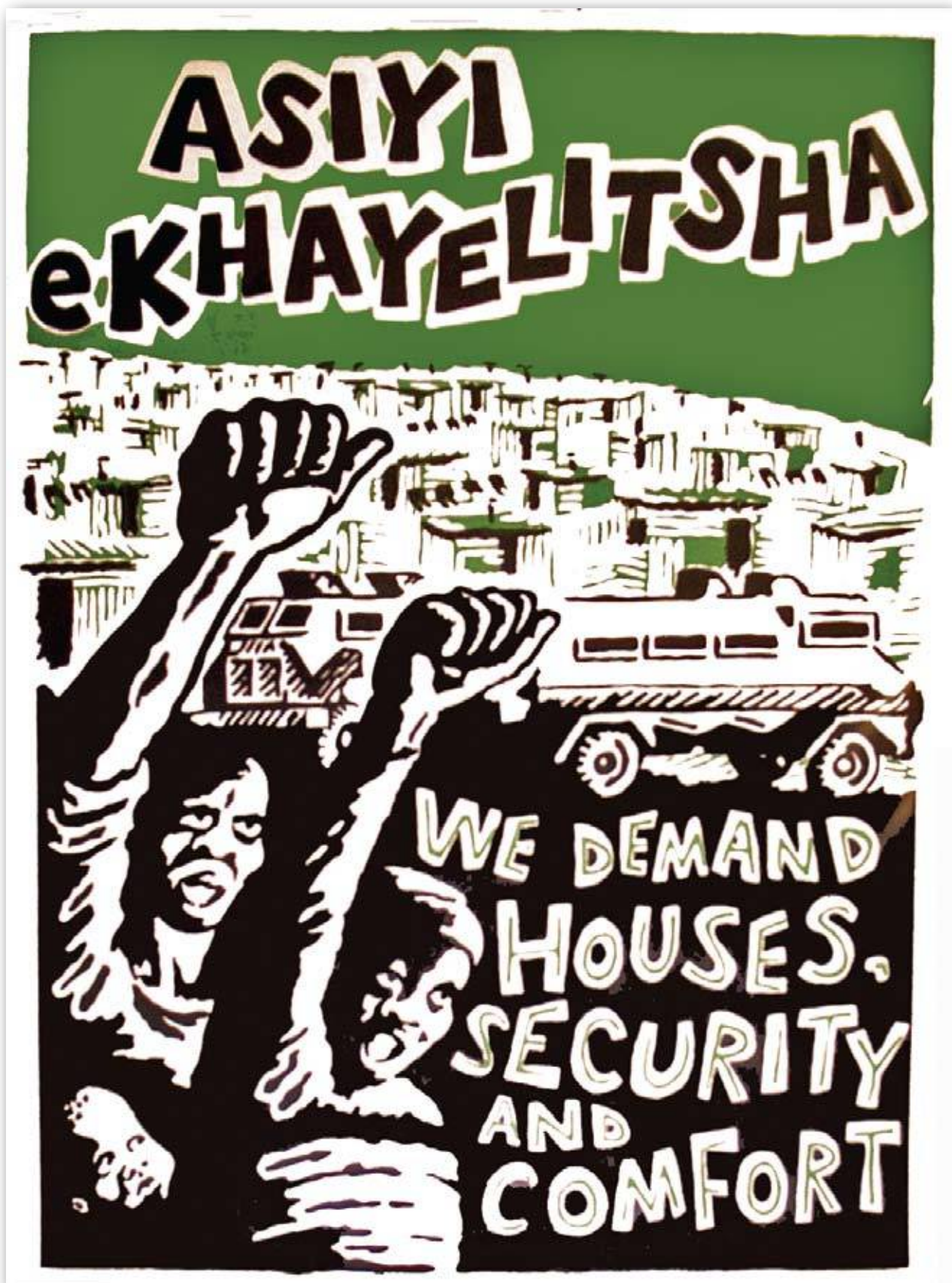


Building community voice



Asiyi eKhayelitsha, artist unknown, CAP, silkscreen, 1985. No 1573

The impact of the Culture and Resistance Festival on the burgeoning poster movement was dramatic. All of the newly-formed grassroots organisations — civics, trade unions, student and parent groups — needed media structures to put forward their points of view, and to help mobilise their members and their communities. This need fed on the enthusiasm that people brought back to media production after the festival. People in the mass movement embraced the concept of culture as a 'weapon of struggle', and found more effective ways to use that weapon in posters, banners, and graphics. In different parts of the country, activists and artists built media structures to give visual expression to the people's demands.

Community Arts Project (CAP) Production Unit

'A decision was taken by the Western Cape organisers that CAP should serve as a springboard for cultural events. This proved to be a turning point for CAP. The role of the artist was discussed in depth at the [Gaborone] festival, and CAP began to redefine itself in terms of its direction as a training and service centre to all cultural workers.' (CAP flyer, 1988)¹

Artists returned from the Culture and Resistance Festival to South Africa, with a mandate to 'take it back home', to create an art that spoke to and of a people in struggle. John Berndt and Lionel Davis came back with a specific purpose: to establish a poster-making unit within CAP, which would serve the community organisations within the mass movement; and to revitalise the photographic unit.²

The CAP Production Unit was formed by artists who had been working with CAP — notably Patricia de Villiers, Gabby Chamonais, Lionel Davis, and John Berndt — to provide support for grassroots community organisations. It made its services available to organisations like CAYCO (the Cape Youth Congress), UWO (United Women's Organisation), and the emerging trade unions. Many of these community groups would eventually unite under the banner of the United Democratic Front (UDF). CAP itself moved from Mowbray to Community House in Salt River, to be closer to community organisations.

Tensions arose between the new CAP Production Unit and the existing CAP arts education project. Some of the artists saw themselves as training people within the community in arts skills — perhaps a step away from political involvement — while others saw their work as a part of the growing mass democratic movement.

The Production Unit advocated a populist, egalitarian attitude towards image making. 'You didn't have to be an artist to make an image, to make a poster', John Berndt argued. He felt the new unit should be positioned 'within the media ambit, rather than the art context', and he promoted this approach both within CAP itself and with funders. He admits that may have increased tensions within the group.

In contrast, Trish de Villiers recalls:

'As people who started out as artists (in CAP), we gave more emphasis to developing people as artists — we banged our heads against walls because we emphasised training — not only artistically competent and literate, but also technically competent. The emphasis was on the handmade image and the process of generating their own images; to draw pictures and translate them into images.'³

At the same time, CAP's production unit also experimented with low-cost and low-technology silk screening. However, making dyes from natural material such as beetroot proved to be laborious and indeed more expensive than travelling to town to buy a pot of commercial ink. For immediate and urgent tasks, workshops tended to regard the low-technology approach as impractical.



Tricameral Blues, artist unknown, CAP, 1984. No. 653

Over time, the tensions between production and education moved towards a compromise position: 'We (the artists) designed for others – but nobody was learning, so we changed to teaching', commented Lionel Davis.⁴ From 1985, CAP conducted workshops to train community organisations to do their own posters and t-shirts, and to develop their own imagery. The people who came on these courses to make posters were often quite separate from those taking arts education programmes at CAP.

Most activists who attended the workshops on behalf of mass-based organisations came with little visual vocabulary for struggle. A large part of the workshopping therefore revolved around developing this vocabulary. People who came in as political activists felt comfortable with a visual vocabulary that included images of barbed wire, police vehicles, clenched fists; some of those from a fine arts background were not. Those with more training in art who worked on posters felt that the 'language of struggle' was adhered to 'somewhat slavishly'. Lionel Davis pointed out that:

'Symbols used in posters came from international socialist symbols – from banners – from other revolutions: the flag, the banner, the wake-up call, people marching. I got *gatvol* [thoroughly fed up] of clenched fists.'⁵

Nonetheless, the process resulted in the creation of what Trish de Villiers calls a 'local visual vocabulary, putting together drawings and photographs and more standardised symbols'.⁶

The use and repetition of such images of struggle, in the form of photographs or symbols from international struggles, did not eliminate considerations of aesthetics and design. Not every poster was assessed for 'aesthetic' content. Justin Wells described working with CAP:

'If a UDF sub-committee needed to use CAP it was always available; you could sneak in at any time. Official CAP people would just hand over the keys (this was the old CAP building in Chapel Street).'⁷

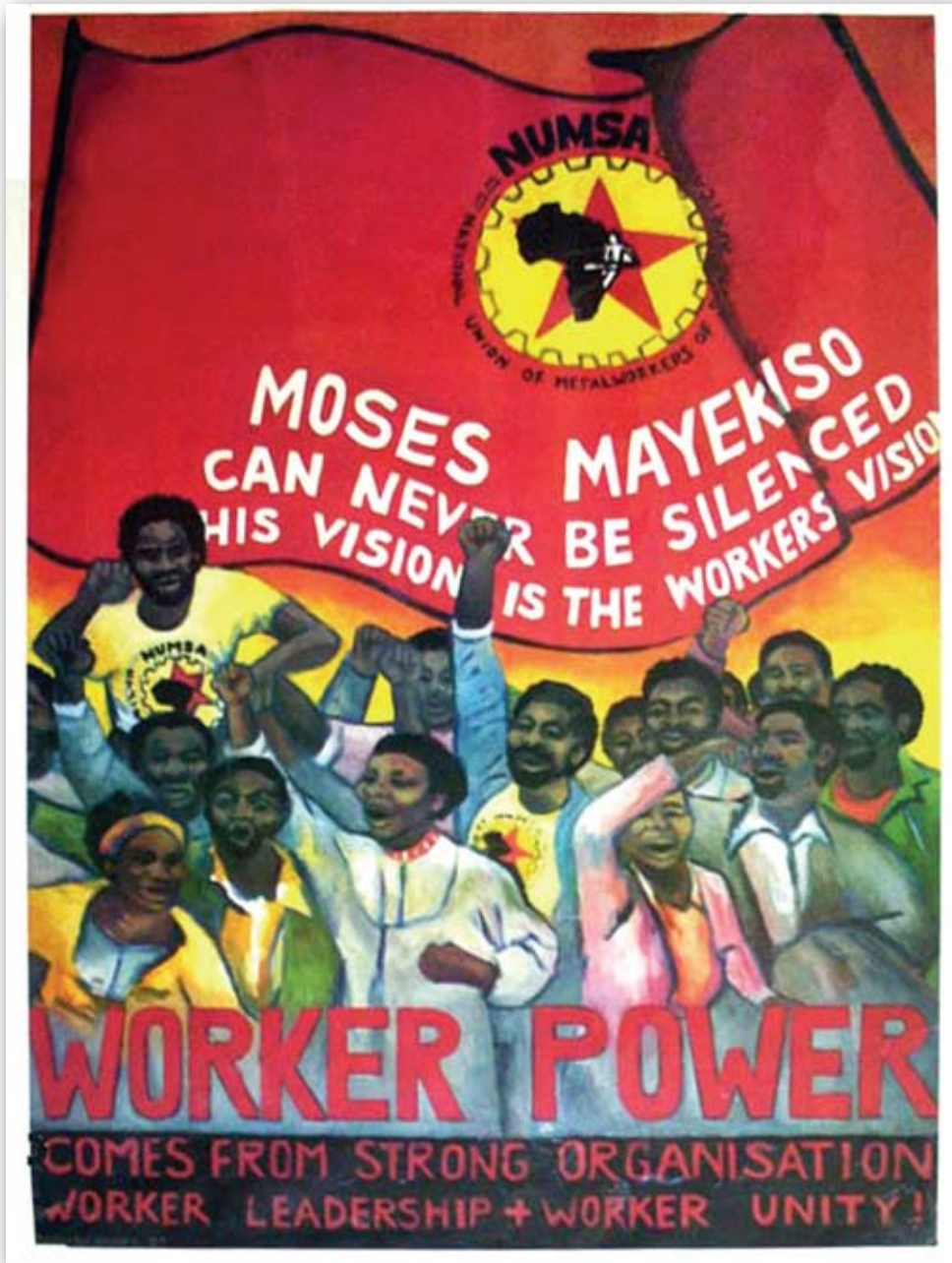
At other times, however, working artists were engaged to draw up posters using the range of symbols and images developed at workshops. Posters made for theatre or other cultural events often demanded more elaborate artistic conception. Students in the CAP arts education projects found these images of struggle, and these concerns, seeping into their drawings and paintings and art prints. Some, like Billy Mandindi and Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya, later went on to study at Michaelis.

In recent years, critics and art historians have dwelt at length on the perceived conflict between making 'art' and poster production – depicting this conflict as impacting negatively on the artist's creative moment. This line of criticism ranges from Lionel Davis' boredom with what he came to see as monotonous imagery to the total dismissal of posters as an art form by certain critics. For example, one art historian recently remarked that Thami Mnyele 'ceased to develop as an artist' in his later years, as he 'only' produced posters. There is no doubt that the historical record shows that tensions flowed between the demands of individual innovation and insight on the one hand, and communication of message and collective perception on the other. But perhaps the problem is that commentators interpret these tensions as an insurmountable barricade between the two positions, rather than as a dialectic, an integral part of the driving force towards creativity.

People who saw themselves primarily as activists remained keenly aware that the art done through CAP was not a substitute for political mobilisation, or indeed for the armed struggle; but rather a complement to these. Poster production fitted within, and worked to create, a larger political awareness; it could never substitute for that. Ismail Moss was organising underground structures during this time at CAP. He comments that from their perspective it was crucial that CAP remain 'depoliticised'

'Symbols used in posters came from international socialist symbols from banners from other revolutions: the flag, banner, the wake-up call, people marching. I got *gatvol* of clenched fists. These images needed defiance, both to print, and also for people who wore them.'

Lionel Davis



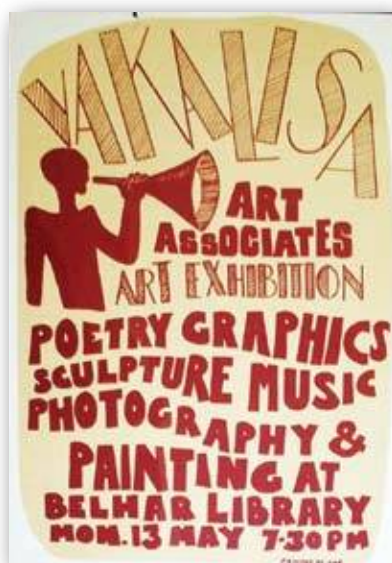
Moses Mayekiso, Shelley Sack, for NUMSA at CAP, circa 1985. No. 1475

to allow the underground structures to survive. 'We realised that there would sooner or later be a clampdown.' He also emphasises:

'CAP itself was "a legitimate interface" — not a front. It comes down to having four pillars of struggle. At the same time people had to realise that the struggle for emancipation is bigger than shouting slogans.'⁸

Moss left CAP in 1984 to join the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe in Botswana and then Angola.

Expressing the flip side of this dynamic, Justin Wells positions poster-making as his primary personal contribution and commitment to the struggle: 'The posters weren't only camouflage (for political involvement): people took them seriously.'⁹



Vakalisa, artist unknown, silkscreen, circa 1985. No. 2284 fol.



Untitled etching, Lionel Davis, etching, printed in *Vakalisa* Calendar, 1985. No. 2284, fol.



Untitled, Martin Stevens, etching, printed in *Vakalisa* Calendar, 1985. No. 2284, fol.

Vakalisa

Black artists who previously contributed to *Staffrider* — photographers, writers, and artists including (amongst others) James Mathews, Pascal Gwala, Matsemela Manaka, Garth Erasmus, Mavis Smallberg, Patrick Hole, and Rashid Lombard — formed an organisation called Vakalisa in Cape Town. Vakalisa sought to provide a platform where the ideas and people in the black community should develop collectively and independently.

'Vakalisa Art Associates accept the responsibility that artists and cultural activists have a duty to identify and respond to the needs of the community that they find themselves in. Vakalisa strives toward a closer co-operation with other cultural groups who share a common progressive ideology and further seeks to encourage other individuals to work collectively with others in their own communities to establish similar cultural collectives.' (*Vakalisa* calendar)¹⁰

The Silkscreen Training Project (STP)

In Doornfontein in Johannesburg, Morris Smithers formed the Silkscreen Training Project (STP) in November 1983.

Like the CAP Production Unit, Smithers conceived of STP as a poster production and training centre for community organisations. Smithers had gained his first experiences of poster making with the Junction Avenue workshops in the late 1970s. By 1981, he identified the need for a specialised organisation to spread the skills of print production and to make facilities available for the mass democratic movement. In 1982, upon visiting Medu in Gaborone, Morris expressed his surprise that Medu did not consist of 'a vast grey factory full of workers busily producing posters'. (Medu posters were usually printed at night in a borrowed university classroom or somebody's garage).¹¹ By the time he founded STP, Smithers considered the long-term goal of STP would be to 'encourage little workshops springing up in the townships'.¹²

STP aimed at training people who were activists to produce their own print media. Community organisations would send members to participate in design workshops, who would then print the material. STP's financial limitations — it was funded through donors — meant that it could not employ a large number of full-time workers. Rather, they relied upon participation from community organisations — Smithers described the process as 'the (community) organisation would send a team of people, usually four or five people, to workshop the design, and produce it'.¹³

STP could handprint up to 2 000 copies on their silk screens, although they would usually send designs to a commercial press if the print run went over 500. STP employed two people as 'production crew' to help with the print process. These were Xeba and Mzwake Mbuli (later reknowned as 'the peoples' poet'). The set-up produced similar constraints to those that developed at the CAP Production Unit. Design discussions in STP workshops usually took two hours. But, Smithers noted,



Resist Bantustan violence, artist unknown, printed at STP, circa 1984. No. 756

'CAP had the advantage that it existed to teach art within the community — it had systems in place to workshop art and imagery. But there was no reserve of trained artistic talent at STP ... the system fell into the trap of being caught up in frenzy — poster production became a conveyor belt situation, with no time for reflection or planning, it was hands on. Organisations sent different people each time, with no continuity and heavy turn-over of people working on the posters.

'We wanted to use the whole thing as a way of developing a range of skills — the skill of expression, using images that were relevant, that resonated with people. We never got to the point where we sat down and asked "what are we doing artistically"; we just found imagery and ideas.'¹⁴

According to Smithers, these workshops would 'take what was current' — 'notably photographs, and fists in the air'. Imagery was eclectic, with little emphasis on 'art'. Sometimes posters were made by just putting down the factual information; it was not worth the effort to produce major art for something which was just advertising a meeting.

Because they could not afford letaset sheets, they would buy one set of letaset and photocopy it, blow it up to size on the photostat machine if necessary, and trace each letter by hand on to the stencil. Some material was typeset at MARS (Media and Resource Services), a semi-commercial typesetting organisation that worked with the democratic movement.

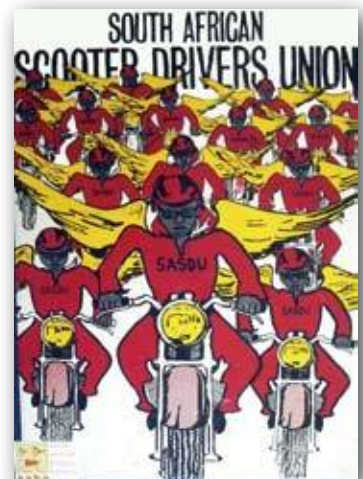
At times, images and designs were taken directly from overseas posters or from 'existing' locally-designed posters. At other times, experienced poster makers (for example, Razia Saleh from Wits University) would bring their designs to STP already made, using their facilities to print. Alternatively, STP held workshops with activists to conceptualise the poster's imagery, then the designs were completed by a person with graphic training (frequently Morris Smithers or artist Johnny Campbell).¹⁵



Condemn Ciskei Repression, artist unknown, printed at STP, circa 1984. No. 268



Unban the ANC, UDF Johannesburg. No. 198



Scooter Drivers Union, drawn by Stephen Rothenburg, graphic design Morris Smithers, printed at STP. No. 264

Dec 18 Cultural Day, STP
Huhudi workshop, 1984
No. 1804



The Huhudi workshop

One of its most successful workshops outside of the Doornfontein offices was a formal workshop held in the small township of Huhudi near Vryburg, in what is now North West Province. Morris describes the scene as a 'vision of a school hall, getting to be dark, candles burning; all around the room adults and kids from the township were looking into the windows'. The activists they trained there went on to set up their own ongoing workshop in a township garage owned by a sympathetic business person; it had electricity and running water. But the workshop was firebombed 'by persons unknown' during the State of Emergency in 1985.



*South Africa in Conflict
Protest, Resistance, Power:*
A photographic exhibition
by Paul Weinberg; note
pamphlet in foreground
printed that day by
Graphic Equaliser. Printed
with ECC, 1988, No. 1353

Social documentary photography and Afropix

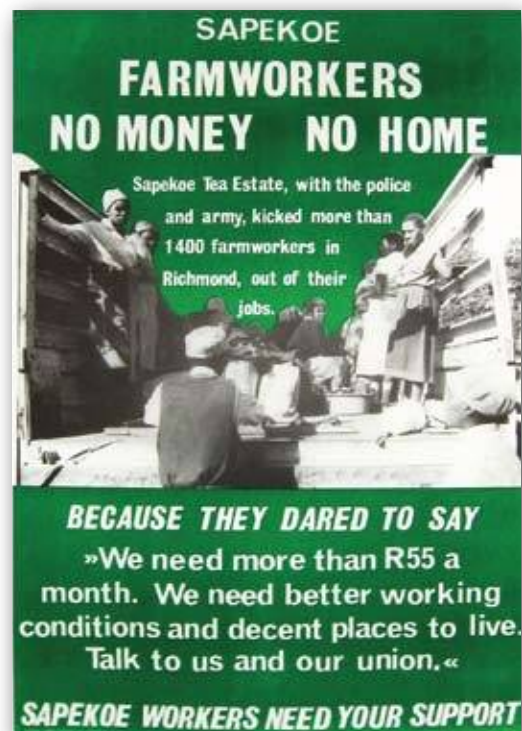
Photography has played a major role in the visual media of resistance in South Africa from the introduction of social documentary photography in the 1930s. In Europe's art history, the photographic image was taken as a challenge to academic representation of reality; in response, drawing and painting shifted away from representation into abstraction and design. In contrast to this, South Africa's graphics picked up, emphasised, incorporated and re-interpreted the photographic image.

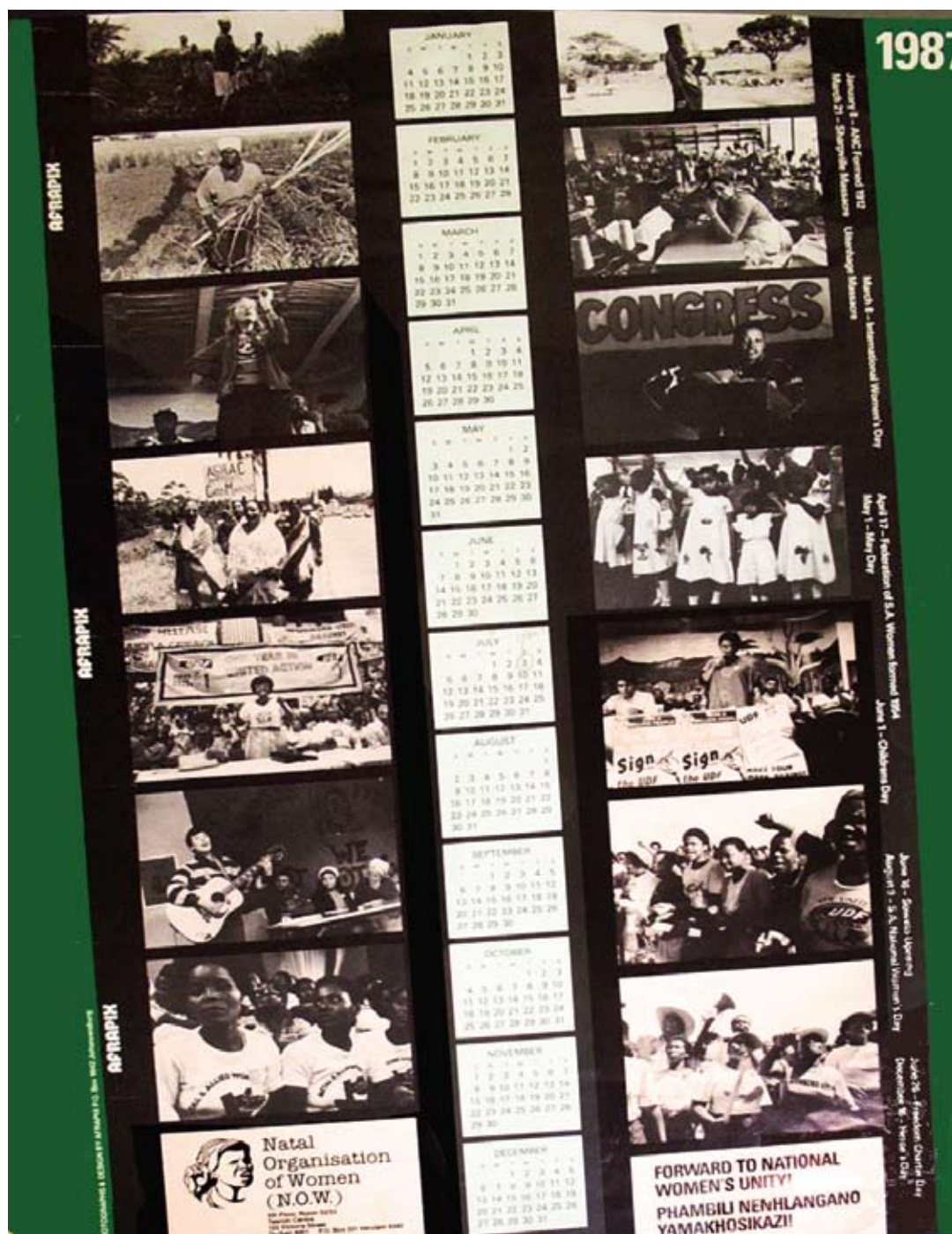
SAPEKOE farmworkers,
photo by Cedric Nunn,
FAWU Durban, 1989.
No. 770

By the 1970s and 1980s, photographers took a central role in generating and promoting the images of struggle. Community media and the 'alternative press' used photographic images to recognise, confirm and contest the realities of township life. The photograph 'proved' the actuality of oppression and repression that conventional media ignored and denied.

The photographers themselves were well aware of their role as committed participants in the struggle against apartheid. Where news photography often claims it 'merely' records, giving no commentary, the photographers of the South African struggle defined a clearly activist position.

'Photographs are part of a visual language — sometimes with the help of the written word, sometimes without ... An alternative press exists through which the visual element can help to inform and to mobilise. There are general publications ranging from newspapers to magazines which are open to another view. Posters, calendars, and informal exhibitions help qualify messages at meetings and other gatherings within the political and social process. All these are means whereby the photographer can hit back.





Natal Organisation of Women
1987 Calendar,
artist unknown,
photographs by
Afrapix, printed
in Johannesburg,
1986, No. 2131

'We say: Pick up your camera and go look, record and share. The right to see knows no obstacle. We also recognise that ideas can't exist if they are not based on the practical world ... Use these experiences to create more awareness, more consciousness around you.'

'We are living in a country trapped in a civil war ... Photographers deserve no special status. They're ordinary people who are faced with the same choices every South African is faced with — sit back and watch the bulldozer, or hit back.'¹⁶

One of the decisions of the visual arts group at the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival was to position social documentary photography within the production of resistance imagery. Shortly after the Culture and Resistance Festival, photographers from around the country came together to form a collective called Afrapix. A number

of photographers had been active in the Culture and Resistance discussions (including Omar Badsha, Peter McKenzie, Paul Weinberg, Rafs Mayet).¹⁷ Cedric Nunn explains:

'The Afrapix archive of images was set up to provide a database of images that reflected oppression, struggle, and resistance. The mandate was the same as STP and CAP; the founders were also at Culture and Resistance.

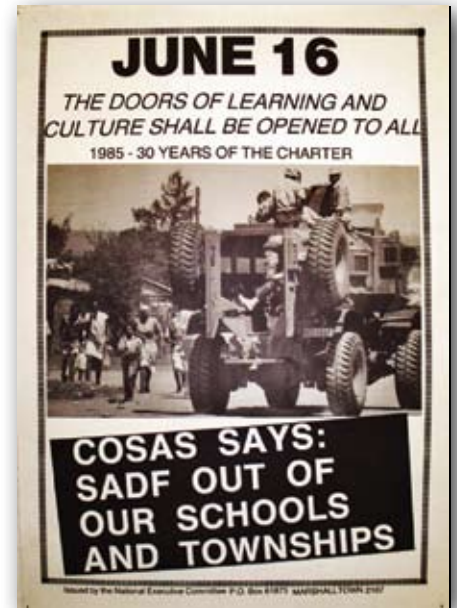
'For many organisations, Afrapix was one of the first ports of call for photographs'.¹⁸

The main office of Afrapix was in Johannesburg, although they also had a dark room in Durban. The photographers worked from home. People would take photos around specific themes: housing, living conditions, protest and confrontation. They held weekly meetings to discuss what needed to be photographed. It was, Cedric complained,

'... an organisation run by committee. Each person reported on what he or she was working on. There would be an events diary, and what had to be covered, what requests had been received for pictures, mostly from the alternative press. Then packages were sent to the anti-apartheid movement and other places [including IDAF and Anti-apartheid in Holland]'.¹⁹

Funding was always a problem. There was no culture of paying for photographs in the progressive press. Afrapix helped to establish a funding process. By the late 1980s, people were commissioned to photograph an organisation's annual general meetings, and other key events. Afrapix tended to use a sliding scale for charges, subsidising alternative press work by charging the commercial press higher rates.

Another issue arose around the laws restricting publishing. From the 1960s, but increasingly during the States of Emergency, the state imposed a range of security laws against publishing pictures of banned people and organisations, or of people in jail. By the late 1980s, the publication of such images could result in a R20 000 fine. Rafs Mayet explains this was more of a threat than an immediate danger for photographers: 'I knew I could not photograph strategic buildings and places ... but no one was ever charged under that'.²⁰



June 16 COSAS Says: SADF out of our schools, townships, printed at STP, Johannesburg, 1985. No. 1198



Women Unite, poster by Jodac, litho, Johannesburg, 1984. No. 798

Photographs as images of reality

Participants in some poster workshops were encouraged to use photographs rather than drawn images. Photographs were regarded as more realistic, more easily recognisable. Participants in such workshops usually did not use photographs that they had taken themselves.

Photographers were encouraged to become part of the poster-making and graphic design process, in discussions, in 'generating meaning', and in layout. By the late 1980s, CAP ran photographic workshops alongside its production processes.

Most photographs came from 'real' contexts — although not necessarily of the immediate content of the poster. One poster commemorates the deaths of people shot by police in Cradock, using a photograph of an unidentified dead body not directly related to the Cradock killings. A photo of church dignitaries marching is used to announce a forthcoming church protest meeting; clearly the image had to be taken before the event.

The CAP production unit built up a file of photographic images of the struggle, which could be used to compile a poster or graphic within a workshop. (Gabby Chaminois still has the image collection used in CAP poster workshops.)²¹

By 1990, the CAP production unit determined that it would be more appropriate to work with images people make for themselves — even when using photographs. They ran a photographic workshop under Roger Meintjes from Afrapix. Primrose Talakumeni and Mavis Mthandeki— both domestic workers — participated in the workshop:

'Almost without exception observers commented on the "new" appearance of the photographic images — the difference in perspectives and attitudes of "taken" and "being taken" — compared with the usual professional photograph.' (Trish de Villiers)²²



Posters for Peace, artist unknown, printed for ECC at CAP, 1988. No. 1449

Photograph as icon

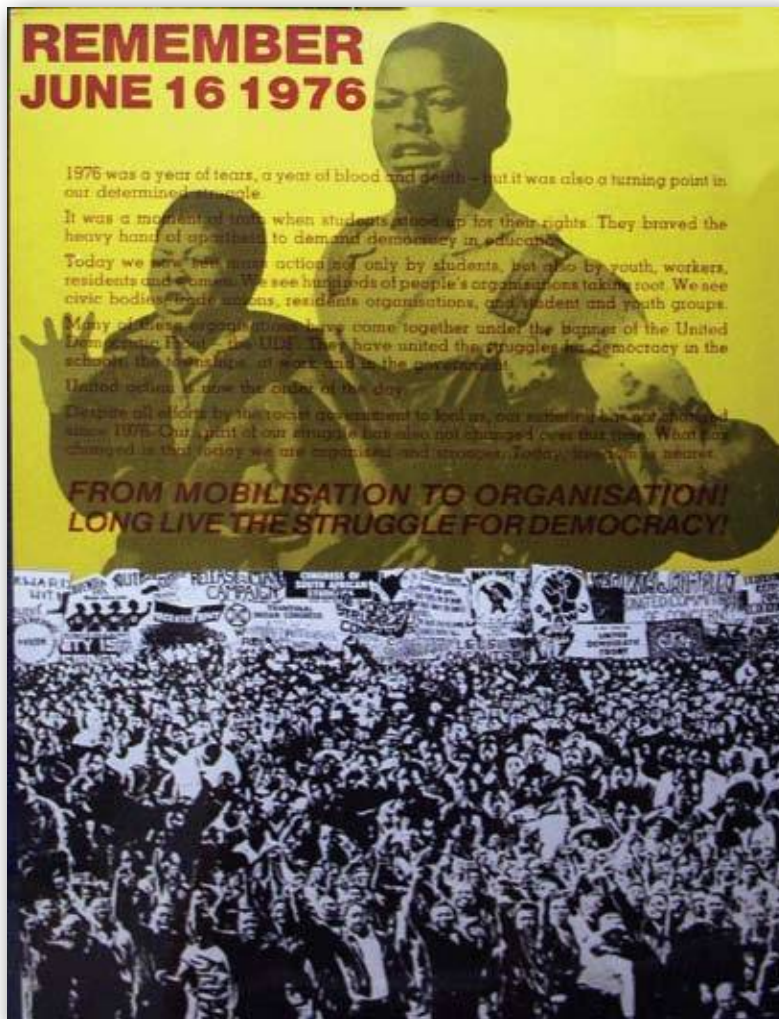
Some photos have been used and reused until they became icons or symbols. The most well-known of these is the 1976 photograph taken by photographer Sam Nzima, portraying Hector Pietersen carried by a friend, Mbuyisa Makhubu, accompanied by his sister Antoinette. This picture came to symbolise June 16. Trish de Villiers commented that even youths who had been aged five or six in 1976 would insist on using that picture for the commemoration.²³

'Take as an example the picture of Hector Pietersen being carried through Soweto by his friends on June 16th 1976 ... This image has been used repeatedly for the last 14 years as a symbol of struggle. It has been drawn, silk screened, etched, linocut, painted, sculpted, stenciled, used as graffiti. I have seen it being used in a hurried and careless way – a quick image for posters being printed on the night of June 15 – and have also seen it painted with care and respect and reverence by someone who apparently hadn't done much painting, but who was obviously moved in a very real way to seize on this image and paint it. Yet I'm sure this work could easily be overlooked as another piece of hack agit prop.'²⁴

Poster artist John Berndt has pointed out that people did not use these 'photographic icons' as simple unmediated images. They worked to make each photograph a new statement that belonged to their group and their time. The photo would be blown up on photostat machines, cut and collaged, the contrast changed, or even redrawn – 'they made it their own'.²⁵



Remember June 16, Alexandra Youth Congress workshop at STP, 1984, No. 2611



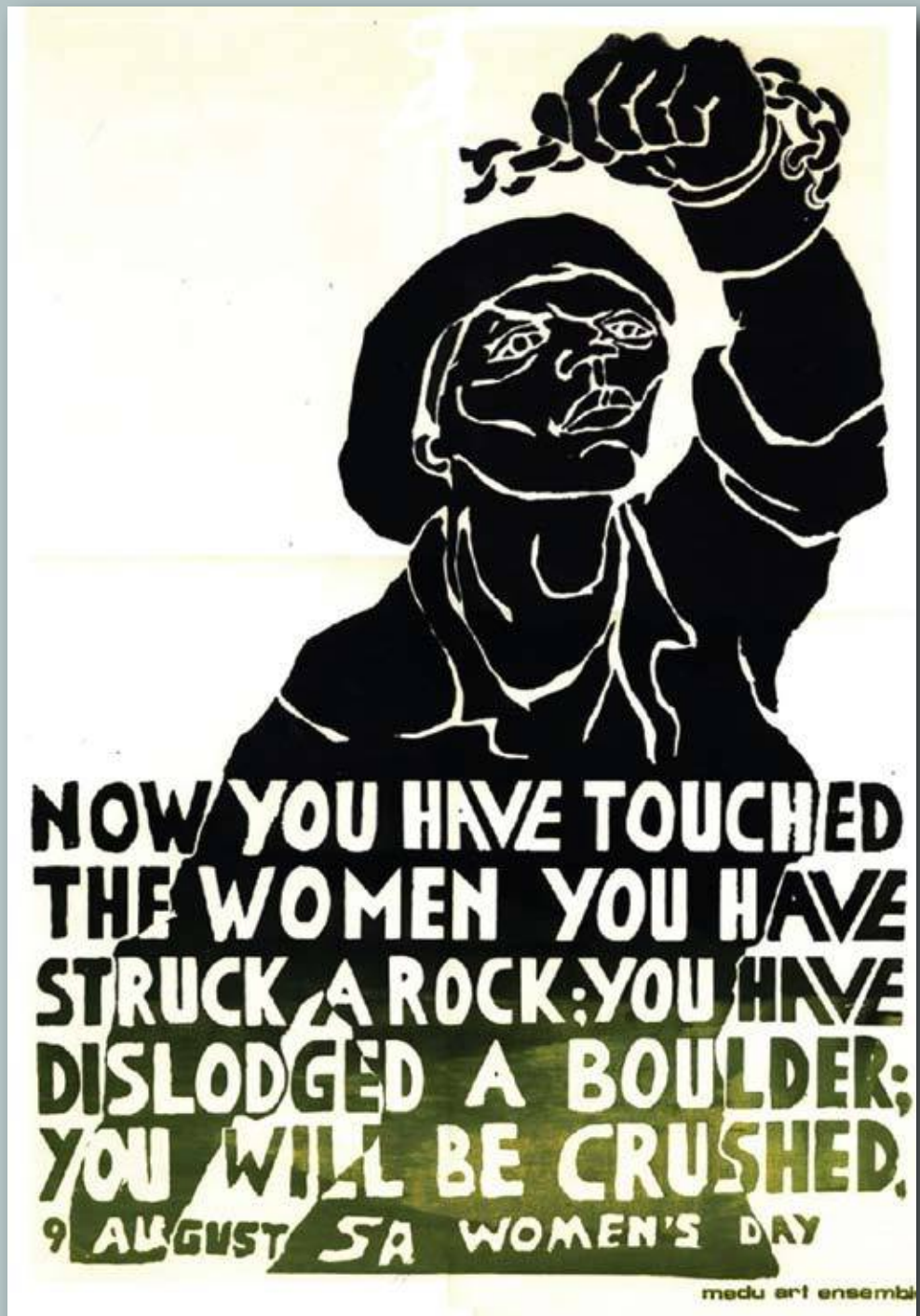
Remember June 16, printed for UDF, Johannesburg, 1985, No. 144

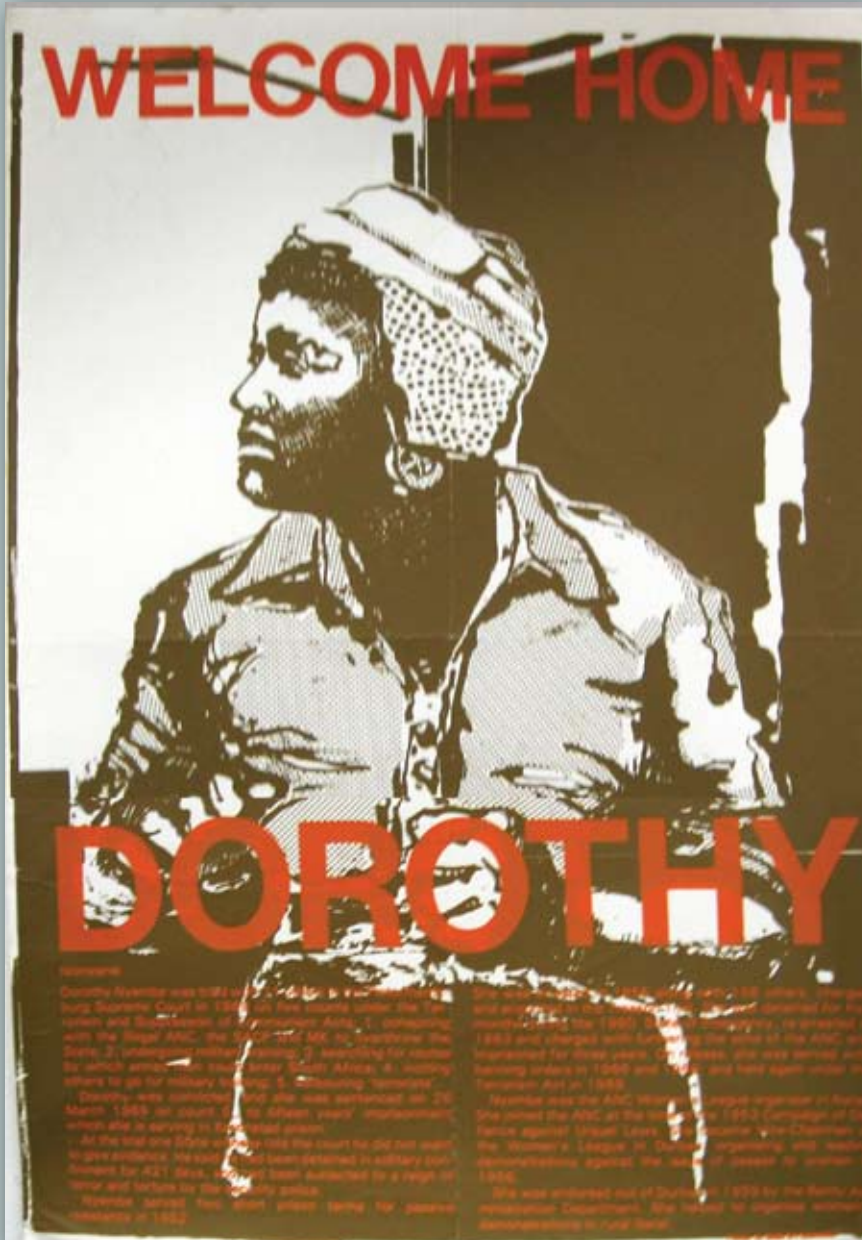
Images of women

A particularly strong series of images emerged through the visual representation of the women's struggle in South Africa.

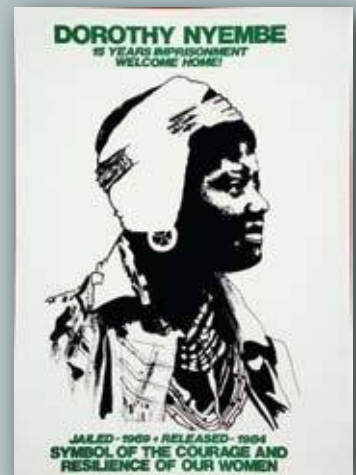
The role of women in the South African liberation struggle has a long history, and can be traced throughout the graphic records. Photographs range from Charlotte Maxeke (who led the 1919 women's protests against passes in Bloemfontein), to Eli Weinberg's photos of Lilian Ngoye, Ray Alexander, and Ruth First (key leaders of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s defiance). Photographs record the August 9th women's march on the Union Buildings in 1956, and the Durban Beer Riots in 1959, where women who made their living in Durban by illegally brewing liquor brought the city to a halt for days.

You have struck a rock, Judy Seidman for Medu, silkscreen, 1982. No. 2618





Welcome Home Dorothy Nyembe, artist Thami Mnyele for MEDU, 1984, No. 457



Dorothy Nyembe, artist Thami Mnyele for ANC, Lusaka, 1984. JS col.

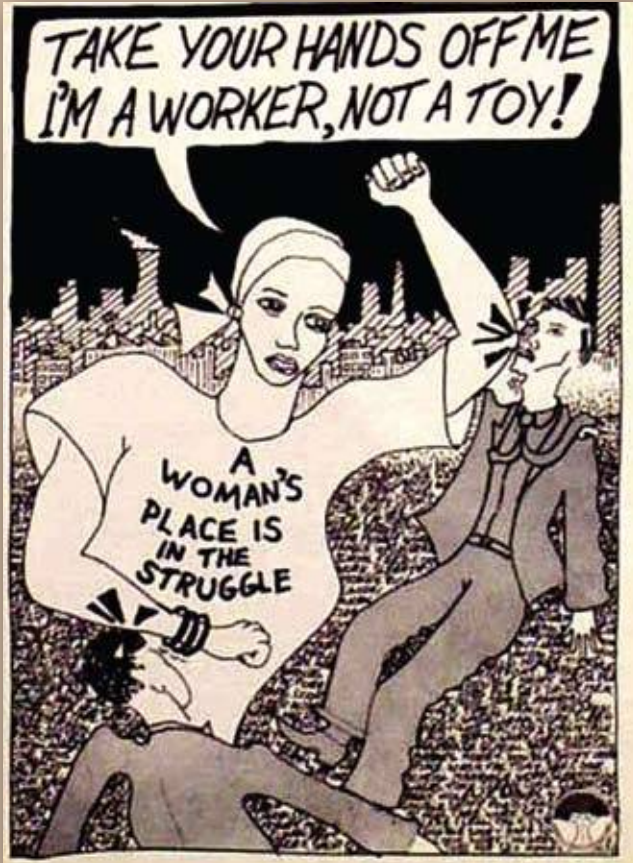
But even with this visual record, women were often regarded as silent sufferers, left behind in rural areas by (male) migrant labour, alone with children, and struggling to simply survive. Those that moved to the townships were at best clinging to an uncertain and unrecognised existence. This combined with entrenched attitudes of patriarchy (in both European and African traditions) to make women's issues and women's struggles ignored and indeed unheard.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the role of women in the liberation struggle came under a new spotlight. Women comrades were detained, tortured, and killed: Lawyer Victoria Mxenge was assassinated; Ruth First was detained, exiled, and assassinated; Jenny Schoon and her daughter Katryn were killed by a parcel bomb; Dorothy Nyembe spent 15 years in prison because she was a senior commander of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

The emergent black unions began to recognise that segregation and discrimination on the grounds of gender could be as dangerous to working-class unity as segregation and discrimination on the ground of race, and that gender discrimination was equally built into the laws and social structures of apartheid labour.



Welcome Dorothy Nyembe, printed at STP for Fedsaw, based upon Medu poster Welcome Home, 1984. No. 2407



Take your hands off me, Steve Rothenberg, 1984. No. 782



Helen Joseph Mass Meeting, artist, date unknown. No. 54

The ANC in exile named the year 1984 'The Year of the Woman'. (Each year, the key ANC speech on 8 January introduced themes for political development – thus 1985 was 'Year of the Youth', 1986 was 'Year of MK'.) Throughout the liberation movement, 1984 saw intense discussions on the role of women: Was there discrimination against women? How did any problem affect women? What women's issues were swept under the carpet because they did not affect men?

An outburst of graphics reflecting women appeared, showing women as leaders and as workers, rather than as assistants to their men. Many of these graphics used photographs from South Africa's struggle archives: Lillian Ngoye at a trade union meeting; Violet Hashe addressing the Defiance Campaign in 1952. Others picked up on the symbols of the South African Women's Movement, as in the song, 'Now you have touched a women/ You have struck a rock/ You have dislodged a boulder/ You will be crushed', sung during the 1956 August 9 March on the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The producers of some of these graphics engages in intense discussions around how to portray a feminist image: Should the woman's image appear 'strong' or 'delicately beautiful'? Are her hands too big? Does this make them 'masculine' or 'powerful'? Should the image be of a woman as mother or sister, or in her own right as a person in struggle? ²⁶

Critics have suggested issues of feminism were imported into the South African struggle from the radical feminist movement in America, frequently claiming that feminist issues were not raised in pre-colonial African traditions. In reality, South Africa's graphic images of women were very deliberately and consciously drawn out of women's experiences and perceptions in the course of the struggle.

ENDNOTES

- 1 CAP IS 10, flyer 1988, included in appendix to Trish de Villiers' dissertation appendix, no page number.
- 2 John Berndt interview.
- 3 Trish de Villiers interview.
- 4 Lionel Davis interview.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Trish de Villiers interview.
- 7 Justin Wells interview.
- 8 Ismail Moss interview.
- 9 Justin Wells interview.
- 10 Vakalisa calendar 1987, Cape Town, (Judy Seidman collection).
- 11 Judy Seidman, personal reminiscence.
- 12 Morris Smithers interview, 15 September 1999, Johannesburg.
- 13 Maurice Smithers interview.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Staffrider magazine presents: South Africa through the Lens (social documentary photography). Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1984, p. 36.
- 17 Cedric Nunn and Rafs Mayet, Joint interview, 15 June 2004,
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Gabby Chaminois interview, 10 September 1999, Cape Town.
- 22 Trish de Villiers, Unpublished dissertation, p. 36.
- 23 Trish de Villiers interview.
- 24 Stacey Stent, article in Spring is Rebellious, p. 77.
- 25 John Berndt interview.
- 26 Judy Seidman, personal reminiscence.



*Women unite
for people's
power, Miles Pelo
for ANC, Lusaka
1984. No. 3566*