

**RED on BLACK**



# **RED on BLACK**

**The Story of the South African  
Poster Movement**

**JUDY SEIDMAN**





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Front cover: logo by Thamsanqa kaMnyele for  
Culture and Resistance Festival, Gaborone, 1982

**‘For Thami, Jenny and Katryn; and all those  
whose courage, creativity and commitment  
coloured this book in red and black.’**

## **Acknowledgements:**

This book about the poster movement has drawn upon the understanding, inspiration, skills and expertise of many, many people: any attempt to separate out individuals for thanks and acknowledgement will inevitably fail to do justice to others.

I thank particularly the people whose stories have gone into the book; people who put up with being interviewed, who patiently guided and corrected me in gathering information. Hopefully your names are all recorded in the text (and spelled correctly). Any errors in reporting these stories remain mine alone.

I thank the South African History Archives and Piers Pigou, for giving the book the support needed to get to actual publication. I also acknowledge and commend SAHA's on-going contribution to collecting and preserving the poster collection upon which this book depends.

I thank the publishers, STE (with special mention of Reedwaan and Kevin both of whom also contributed to the poster-making); and the staff working on physical production.

Atlantic Philanthropies provided funds to give three thousand copies of this book to South African secondary schools, which has taken the book to our most important audience, and made publication possible.

And thanks to those who supported me personally through the trials and traumas of getting it done (parents, daughters, Gwen, sisters and – well, you know who you are).

Finally, the stories in this book rest upon so many people whose names have not yet been recorded, whose contribution still needs proper attribution. I ask that you see this book as a first and hesitant step towards crossing a flooding river of our history; where the gaps between look far greater than the stepping stones. We hope and expect that you who have not been mentioned here will see the need to come forward and record events as you know them, to claim your place in this history.

Judy Seidman  
10 May, 2007

# **Contents**

<b>Forward by Keorapetse Kgositile</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Inherited images of defiance</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Imaging struggle and change: Apartheid and African nationalism</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>1970s rebirth</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Out of the faceless ghettos</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Grassroots voices</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Culture is a weapon of struggle</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Building community voice</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>United Democratic Front</b>	<b>126</b>
<b>Uprising and repression: into the State of Emergency</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>From ungovernability to people's power</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Community mobilisation through the late 1980s</b>	<b>178</b>
<b>Art in the Emergency</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Towards democracy in our time</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Bibliography and references</b>	<b>233</b>

## **RED on BLACK**

Historical points of reference constitute an important aspect of a people's heritage. One does not have to be a philosopher to know and understand that the voice of the artist has always been, and will always be, an integral part of the energies that enhance a people's determined efforts to create and recreate themselves through their lived experience and their sense of identity, from the useful and inspiring aspects of that experience as they build their future.

'Where are you heading?'

"Forward and left."

'Destination?'

'The life of today with its needs and aspirations. Helping to shape the moral and social climate of tomorrow.'

In a nutshell that is how Leon Schiller, a leading figure in the Polish theatre, expressed his credo in 1928. And essentially, that credo is what moves and guides any sensibility involved in the production of images with a sense of social responsibility.

The publication of *Red on Black* is a significant milestone reflecting the visual culture of our struggle. This book, as its sub-title states, is the story of the South African poster movement. The images you are about to look at are informed by our history of struggle and in turn that history is revealed in and through them. But who made the posters in this book? What purpose were they made to serve? When and why?

Here I cannot resist quoting Chidi Amuta, a distinguished scholar and hard-nosed literary critic I respect highly: 'Literature and art have a commitment to freedom and can only thrive in a free state. In a situation bedevilled with unfreedom, the primary responsibility of art is to enlist in the service of freedom and aspire to profundity within the context of this active process. To brush aside this primary responsibility and go in search of artistic excellence in spite of the struggle for freedom is to indulge in theoretical prodigality and abstract formalism.'

It seems then that it should be clear that there can be no serious discussion or assessment of images without taking the categories of their context, content and form into consideration. Context refers to human action and interaction, the political and ideological framework, at whatever period of history is being looked at and into; in this case resistance and mass struggles for national liberation, on various fronts. Content is gesture, movement of life, the social experience captured and projected by the artist. And, of course, form would then be how the artist handles and renders images, symbols, and other devices, to make content visible. Clearly then, content and form are inseparable fellow-workers in the production of images.

The historic Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival, involving people and organisations engaged in arts and culture structures in the South African democratic movement, was hosted by Medu Art Ensemble in Gaborone in 1982. The Culture and Resistance poster, with logo, by Thami Mnye, is included in this book. In my keynote address there, I stated categorically that we were not interested in how it was to be an artist; we were interested (and still are, by the way) in how it was to be alive: 'Fascist tyranny and barbarism in South Africa 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.' That sentiment, expressive of our commitment to struggle for



freedom and affirmation of life as creative activity, is what informs the story of the South African poster movement.

The questions I ask above are answered in the introduction to this book and the text that complements the posters. They were unapologetically utilitarian, produced to serve a struggling people's needs and demands. In these posters, and through them, we are given a clear grasp of how people lived and struggled and made tremendous sacrifices to bring us to where we are today. These posters constitute necessary memorial points of reference. The determination and commitment to life reflected through this slice of the visual culture of our struggle, should enable anyone interested in where we have come from to feel and sense the spirit of those times.

Keorapetse Kgositse  
National Poet Laureate  
Special Adviser to the Minister of Arts & Culture



Portrait of Keorapetse Kgositse speaking at 1982 Culture and Resistance Conference, detail from poster *Shakawe* drawn by Thami Mnye, litho, Gaborone, 1984

## Introduction

# The South African Poster Movement



*We salute the workers*, 1984, designed by Thami Mnyele, printed by SACTU, Lusaka, offset litho, MTN, JS cols.



Images of resistance — posters, graphics in leaflets and magazines, paintings on banners and murals on walls — hold a proud place in South Africa's visual heritage. South Africa's people have responded to repression and exploitation by developing their own voice across every form of creative media — in theatre, poetry, music, dance, and in visual imagery. For each of these forms, people sought for and found images, metaphors, symbols, techniques and styles of expression.

This book begins to tell the stories from one of these areas: the art of graphic resistance. Through a quarter of a century, from 1975 to 2000, the South African poster movement produced political posters that recorded, and engaged with, the struggle for a liberated South Africa.

We call this the 'South African poster movement' for several reasons:

- First, a large number of people produced a massive amount of artwork. (The South African History Archives contains some 4 000 separate posters).
- Second, these poster makers generated distinctive iconographies, styles, messages, and techniques. They created a framework of artistic ideology and a broadly agreed aesthetic approach, hammered out within a common dialogue. This dialogue developed within, and built upon, the decades of struggle for liberation in South Africa. In the words of visual artist and poet Pitika Ntuli:

'South Africa is a cauldron of frustration and hope. The repression — resistance spiral is a consistent, constant rise. The task of the artist is to capture it, for it in turn to find the spiral of change.'<sup>4</sup>

This movement further built upon the centuries-long history of growth and exploration that underlies South Africa's visual arts — a history which ranges from pre-colonial art forms that integrated aesthetic and belief into function and design, to the 20th century use of photographs to expose and explore changing realities, to the conscious development of symbols and icons that give force to a community's own voice and identity.

- Third, the posters themselves capture the experiences of a defined audience with a specific history. These posters speak powerfully for themselves — explicit, loud in describing their times, ideas, experiences, messages. Many talk of events which today remain half submerged; we still have relatively few collected records, stories, or interpretations of what happened during those days. At times these posters provide in themselves the main surviving record.

Too often, looking at these posters, someone says — 'But how could we not remember, not be aware, that 40 people were killed in Uitenhage at a funeral in 1985?' And someone else comments: 'I remember that, that was my story, my pain, my moment.' Sometimes a person says, 'But that's my poster'.

As part of this specific history, the individual poster makers developed organisations and structures to produce and promote their images, linked to yet other organisations and structures which were engaged in the broader liberation struggle.

In identifying this as a movement, we must hasten to point out that — like any movement — there are differences, divisions, disagreements, and sometimes outright splits among the people producing these works. This too is a part of the history, and helps to define the direction the art making followed.

Locating these posters in their historical context becomes part of the ongoing process of collecting and recording our history, a stepping stone along the way to exploring and understanding where we as a people come from.

**'For me as craftsman, the act of creating art should complement the act of creating shelter for my family or liberating the country for me people. This is culture.'**

Thami Mnyele (Unpublished autobiography, 1984)<sup>1</sup>

**'We see struggle as part of us, part of our everything ... you wake up in the morning and it starts coming to you, if it has let you sleep at all; it is about surviving, being resilient, living, singing and fighting. We always felt that as artists we had to try and express what was inside us, what we felt, and depict both the inside and the outside of our lives.'**

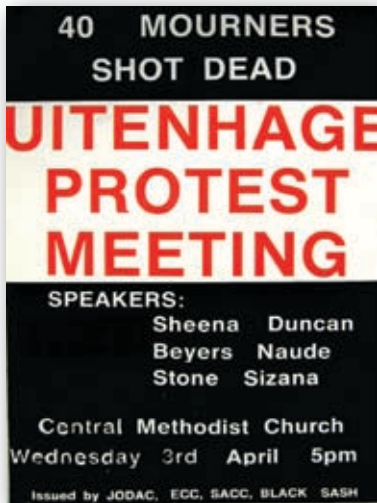
Nise Malange  
(Spring is Rebellious, 1990)<sup>2</sup>

**'Today walls are furiously burning, blown up. Our people are cleansing themselves of the culture of silence, wherein to exist is only to live: thinking is difficult, speaking the word forbidden. Tomorrow, when our people rebuild those walls, our understanding, our history, our victory will be part of that reconstruction.'**

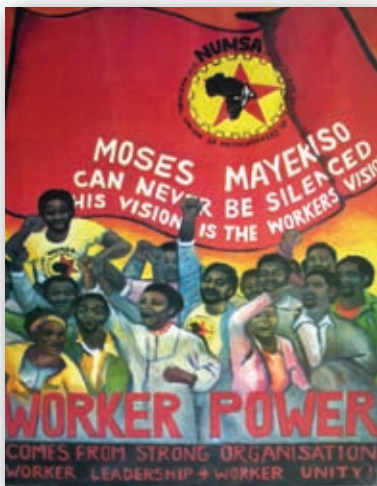
Thami Mnyele and J. Seidman  
(Medu Newsletter No.6 1984)<sup>3</sup>



*Uitenhage Massacre*, 1985, artist unknown, offset litho. No. 82



*Uitenhage Protest meeting*, 1985, artist unknown; issued by JODAC, ECC, SACC, Black Sash, offset litho. No. 1010



*NUMSA Worker Power*, artist Shelley Sack, printed by NUMSA, circa 1985. No. 1475

## Relocating the debates

This poster movement must be located within a broader conception of South African art history and indeed world art history. In doing so, a deliberately revisionist approach is required. The current discourse on South African art history leaves little space for the discussion of how the poster movement developed, for the styles, traditions, and aesthetics that informed it. Current discourse equally leaves little space for identifying and assessing the styles, traditions, and aesthetics that emerged from this poster movement, and how these impact on our art today.

In researching this book and interviewing poster makers, statements emerged that ranged from 'It was never art, or meant to be art', to 'this is our voice, our expression, our belief'. The research repeatedly came up hard against the debates around 'art for art's sake', around function and meaning, around alienation and integration with the community.

## 'Art for art's sake'... or not

The position that meaning should infuse form and content, as opposed to promoting 'art for art's sake' forms a critical axis of the discourse around art in the struggle.

'Arts for art's sake' premises that we should fully appreciate a work taken outside of any mundane context, hung on a gallery wall, and assessed for its internal 'aesthetic' characteristics – usually abstracted form, colour, internal interactions of the materials, styles and techniques. This approach emerged in the late 19th century in Europe, as part of a positioning of the fine arts under the wing of the emerging hegemony of capitalism and imperialism.

'Art of the struggle' proponents argue rather that their meaning and message are integral to the form, colour, and 'abstract' qualities; and that these must be viewed within the visual and cultural vocabularies through which the work has been both conceived, and received. This discussion builds – quite consciously – on the international discourse which rejected 'art for art's sake' – a range of voices from Brecht to Ngugi wa' Thiongo.

Any attempt at repositioning South Africa's poster art of the 1980s needs to highlight these debates. Obviously, such a repositioning cannot be accomplished with reference only to the artwork that constitutes the poster movement; nor will it be done within one book.

## Every poster an artwork ... or not

To affirm that this poster production represents an art movement that we can analyse in artistic terms does not by any means equate to a blanket statement that every political poster produced in this period constitutes a work of art. Some posters were clearly made to meet an extremely limited perceived function – to announce a meeting, to state a demand – not merely subsuming but dismissing as irrelevant or unimportant all issues of form and emotion and overall meaning, in the face of some immediate need. To attempt to categorise every poster from this period as 'art' falls into as great a fallacy as saying none of them should be considered art.

In part, to meet this challenge we need to identify what we mean by art in Southern Africa today – as our own visual language, events, histories and styles, genres, materials and means of production, and linking these to the creation of ideas, ideologies, and beliefs. This forms the starting point for recognising how visual art speaks to us, and what it says or tries to say. In the longer term, this also begins to address why we feel some art affects us, and how it affects us: why we should call this art at all.



## Asserting our heritage of styles, traditions, and skill

Most commentators today agree that what South Africa's colonial and apartheid periods counted as 'art' was curiously skewed by Eurocentric preconceptions of art. Over several centuries ruling colonial elites defined and limited what would be admitted to the canon of South Africa's visual arts. They denied outright the very existence of most of South Africa's pre-colonial visual arts, most often dismissing objects as 'primitive' and 'crude'; subsuming work under headings of craft and design, discounting originality and invention; rejecting it with loathing for 'witchcraft' or 'pagan' content.

The shutters against this work are absolute, as can be seen in a 1997 review by Marilyn Martin, head of the South African National Art Gallery – in which she describes African artists born in the late 19th century as 'the first generation of black artists' (implying there were no black artists before this):

'In the 19th century most artists resident in the country were born or trained overseas and they brought with them firm academic and conservative traditions. ... While black people, their traditional clothing and way of life were being recorded by white painters and sculptors, the first generation of black artists, which included Albert Ntuli (b. 1898), John Mohl (1903-85), George Pemba (b. 1912), Gerard Sekoto (1913-1993) were revealing their own experiences of life in the country and in the townships.'<sup>5</sup>

Where art historians managed to admit that there was any art produced in Africa prior to colonialism, they still posed a dichotomy between 'Euro-centric' and 'Afro-centric' styles and traditions – a categorisation that encapsulates what one writer has called 'all the binaries that are constructed by colonialism – White/Black, Coloniser/Colonised, Self/Other, Modern/Primitive, etc, etc' (Rasheed Araeen, founding editor of *Third Text*).<sup>6</sup> Much effort had to go into explaining various 'transitional' works which fail to fit neatly into the designated categories.

Under apartheid South Africa, these categories were underlined and reinforced by the process called 're-tribalisation'. Apartheid ideology around culture defined Africa's pre-colonial culture as unchanging and unchangeable, with no adaptation to new social and economic experience. This ideology was ruthlessly enforced in the structures surrounding the visual arts: notably, in lack of arts taught through 'Bantu Education' (in the visual arts, African students were either not taught at all, or taught 'traditional craft-making', such as basket-weaving and carving wooden spoons), and in the removal of existing art training institutions to areas outside of the 'whites only' urban centres.

The approach promoted under the concept of 're-tribalisation' left no room for either creativity, or innovation within the postulated 'inherited' African tribal culture. Nor did it see that 'tribal' culture as a living, growing body; styles and techniques would be endlessly reproduced, unchanging, unchallenging, unresponsive to the changing circumstances of human life. This translated directly into a concept of African art that rested primarily on decoration and simplicity. Thus, the person who wrote the syllabus for arts and crafts for Bantu Education in Natal wrote about introducing linocut printmaking to African schools:

'In the strong contrast of black and white which is the especial quality of linocuts, they [African art students] find a medium which is particularly suitable to this rather deliberate manner of working, always tending to the decorative.' (P. Gossert)<sup>7</sup>



## **ART TOWARD SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

AN EXHIBITION OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART  
JUNE 10 — AUGUST 10, 1982

### **CULTURE AND RESISTANCE**

A SYMPOSIUM/FESTIVAL OF SOUTH AFRICAN ART PHOTOGRAPHY FILM LITERATURE THEATRE MUSIC DANCE

JULY 5 — JULY 9



**NATIONAL MUSEUM & ART GALLERY GABORONE BOTSWANA**

The artist walks a tightrope between the struggling black community and the white suburbs. *Art for Social Development*, designed collectively by Thami Mnyele and Gordon Metz, for the Gaborone Culture and Resistance Festival and Art for Social Development exhibition (see page 104), No. 2825



## Construction of meaning in Africa's art

Although dominant art criticism of South African art has been infused with colonialist and 're-tribalist' approaches for many years, this has never been completely unchallenged. As early as 1961, Selby Mvusi, a South African artist and academic (admittedly writing in the United States) commented:

'... that some areas that need to be re-excavated to reposition South Africa's art today include:

- a complete reassessment of pre-colonial visual culture;
- the issues of developing cultural language, forms, styles, expressions that came out of the response to a changing society, impacted by settlers, colonialism, and capitalism;
- interaction and interpretation of continental and international struggles in a local context.<sup>9</sup>

As well as the still unexcavated pre-colonial heritage, many images, concepts and perceptions came to South Africa from a wide heritage of struggle throughout the world. Any exploration of resistance art needs to at least flag the presence of, and relationship to, the global picture. This exploration also needs to take account of what South Africans brought with them to foreign shores, as a contribution to international artistic expression; it should also include what was brought back into South Africa, at times through the nitty-gritty of the struggle itself — including material smuggled in through the underground, from contacts with comrades in exile, from links with solidarity movements. Again, this remains a largely hidden history, which ranges from the involvement of South Africans in Africanist movements in the US and England in the early 20th century, to their role in pan-Africanist debates, and to the links with Africa's cultures of independence that blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s. This book does not even begin to explore these links in the depth they deserve; at best, they are flagged here for future serious study.

## The discourse around individual and collective art making

South Africa's poster making has been characterised by an ongoing dialogue between the individual artist's emotions, beliefs and creativity on the one hand, and collective and community statement on the other. In recent times, approaches to the visual arts have tended to enshrine the individual maker and personal inspiration poised in opposition to, even in conflict with, collective perception and social commentary. Some advocates of 'fine art' dismiss the influences of community, and group traditions, as mere 'copying'; other commentators reject collective statement as propaganda.

But the recognition and promotion of collective statement as a creative mainspring in artwork is by no means unique to the South African poster movement. Art critic Okwui Enwezor comments:

'If we look back historically collectives tend to emerge during periods of crisis, in moments of social upheaval and political uncertainty within society. Such crisis often forces reappraisals of conditions of production, re-evaluation of the nature of artistic work, and recognition of the position of the artist in relation to economic, social and political institutions.'<sup>10</sup>

Further, this interaction between the collective and individual has been identified as deeply entrenched in South Africa's aesthetic approaches. One academic writer describes 'traditional' South African praise poetry in these terms:

**'Challenges of African artists are interwoven with those problems that plague African people. An African artist is as much a victim of dispossession and dehumanisation as an African farmer. An artist without freedom of expression is as disadvantaged, disabled and disarmed as a farmer without the right over the land. Furthermore, challenges of African artists need to be examined within their historical context. African artists need to sharpen their African consciousness in order to advocate for "change and continuity".'**

Matsamela Manaka<sup>8</sup>

'The poem itself is a statement of personal identity, "expressing tension between the ethics of community solidarity and the striving egotism of the individual". The performance of oral poetry is in this sense ... a collective act. Common experience and perceptions based upon shared values and understandings provide the context within which any performance becomes aesthetically, emotionally, and socially meaningful.'<sup>11</sup>

Resistance graphics of the late 20th century demand to be viewed through a similar lens. For South Africa's resistance art, individual inspiration, creativity and skill played a key role, with each artist walking the line between personal perception, understanding, and creativity and the more collective process created by the conscious attempts of people working together.

In the poster movement, this interaction between collective and individual found concrete form in the processes used to generate graphics. Groups debated what images might be used, and suggested changes to each person's attempts to draw them. The group discussed how the intended audience might interpret each image. In turn, the individual art maker would respect and invite these inputs. Collective input should help explore belief and emotion, rather than threaten or dilute individual perception.

We may here also consider the myth that 'struggle art' merely force-feeds political correctness and clichés in the place of human positives — of love, hope, caring, friendship; but we raise this myth only to reject it. Few people who worked within these collectives saw them as straitjackets imposed on artists who would rather paint sunflowers and sunsets than clenched fists. Jazz writer, Gwen Ansell, says of the music of the struggle:

'In our struggle for freedom, the greatest artists, Charlotte Manye, Vuyisile Mini, Kippie Moeketsi, Miriam Makeba and many more — did not merely provide some kind of soundtrack to struggle. They lived it. In a society that denied them rights, humanity and identity, as people and as artists; a society characterised by its overwhelming moral ugliness, making beauty and sharing it with their community was struggle. Finding the images, notes and words to express what was in people's hearts was struggle, not different, in the words of painter Thami Mnye, from demanding housing or taking up arms against the enemy.'<sup>12</sup>

### **Political and organisational links**

In collecting material for this book, a significant problem around identifying and labelling the political ties of artists and activists was encountered. The art we look at here was avowedly political, most often generated for specific organisations, movements, and events. We argue that most if not all people making this artwork saw no contradiction between political belief, feelings, ideals and commitments, and the production of their art — indeed, these factors reinforced and informed that production.

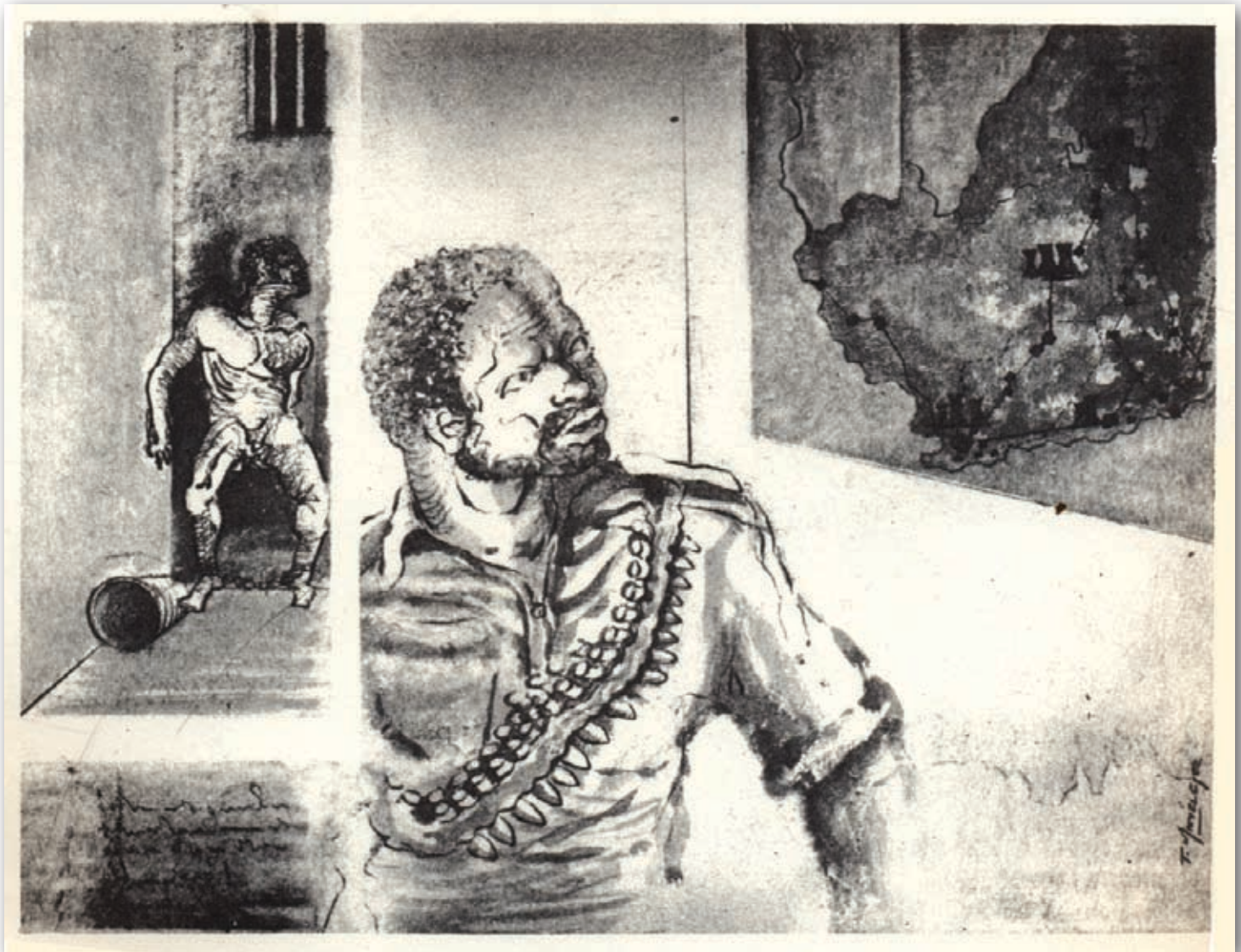
But there is undoubtedly a practical contradiction between using your artwork to 'shout your beliefs from the rooftops' and the demands of illegal and underground struggle. The organisations and structures that produced these posters were illegal, banned, and/or connected to illegal and banned organisations. 'Promoting the aims' entered the common vocabulary from the security laws; from the 1950s it was illegal to 'promote the aims of a banned organisation' — whether in posters, through speeches, or as visible supporters in a march on the street, with penalties of years in jail.

Therefore, artists did not put their names to posters for good political reasons — even when they could have claimed with pride that this was their personal work. They



vehemently denied, even to those they truly trusted and loved, that they had hard political links. 'I never even told my brother I was a member of a cell', said one artist; 'when he asked, I looked him in the eyes and said, "Who, me?"' And while most people were then, and remain now, proud of those underground links, disclosing them even today may have a strong resemblance to 'coming out of the closet'. It is hard to inform a person you really like or love that you lied to him or her for years about something that was so fundamental to your life.

There can be no doubt that a number of the artists discussed here engaged in underground activities that had a direct impact on their use of images, symbols, and conceptions. One example: Thami Mnyele spent some months in the early 1980s training in the ANC military camps in Angola. In late 1982, he drew a picture of a commander instructing a class, as an illustration for Wally Serote's poem, 'The Night Keeps Winking'. In private, he explained this was not a symbolic romanticisation of the liberation war: it was based upon sketches he did while in the MK camps, from real life.<sup>13</sup>



*Untitled (commander briefing troops)*, drawing by Thami Mnyele, pen and ink, in *The Night Keeps Winking*, Medu, Gaborone, 1982

A number of people interviewed for this book did discuss the pressures of illegal organisation on their work, and their reactions to those pressures. Several pointed out that they played the 'dumb artist' in public as part of their cover, denying any interest or awareness in the ideas behind their work. Several spoke with bitterness about people who claimed heroic status in post-apartheid society for what could be perceived as relatively little political involvement.

Given these tensions, in the process of this research people were not asked about their own organisational and underground status unless they volunteered that information within the discussion of their art making — as some did. But this means that those who do not yet feel comfortable exploring their political links in public may not be fully represented.

In terms of this work, therefore, organisational links with banned structures and liberation movements remain an area that should be flagged for further in-depth research. Ultimately, this information can only add colour and richness to our understanding of the art work.

### **A tentative step down a long path**

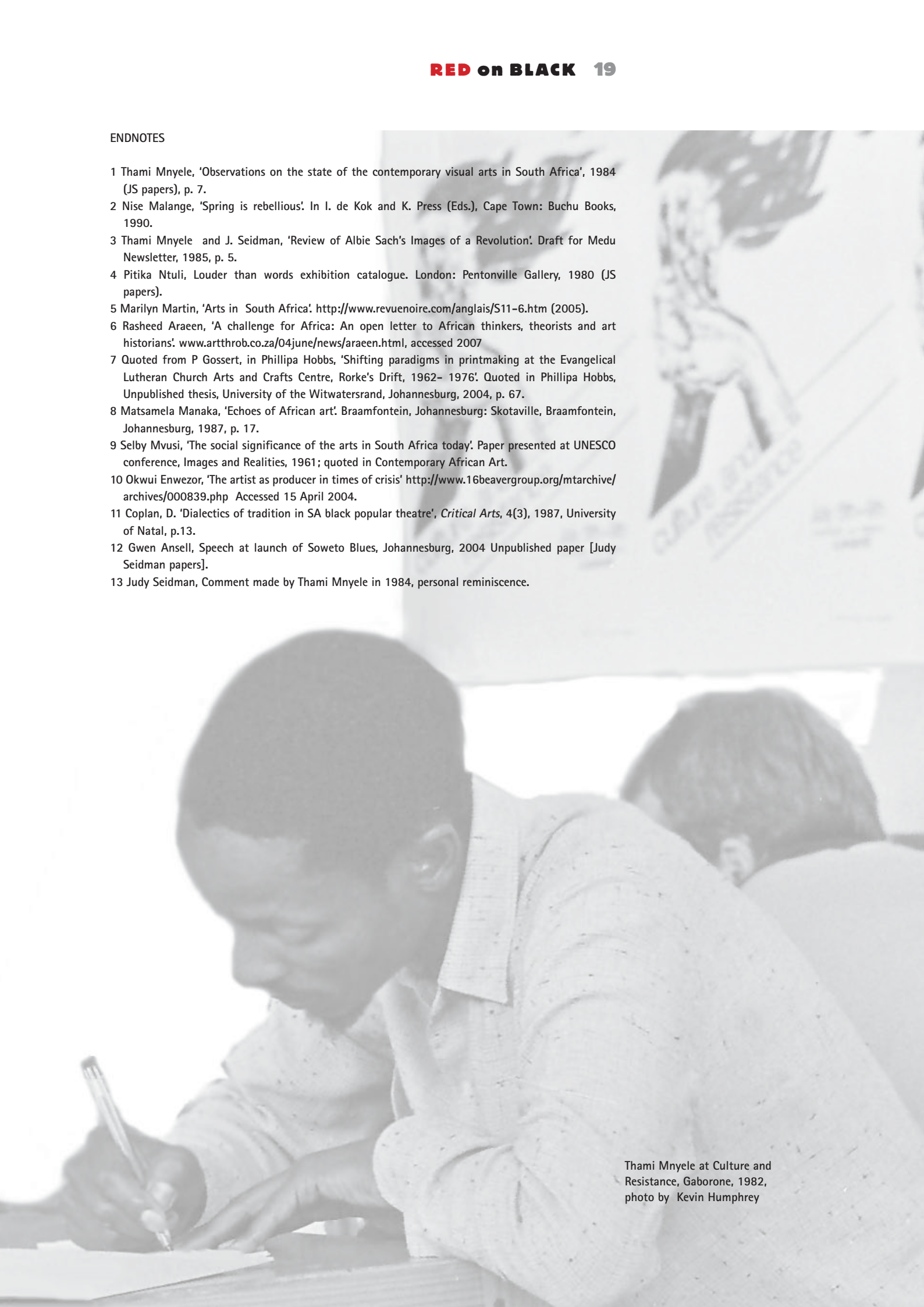
Finally, we need to underline other limitations and omissions in this current work. This study is at best a first attempt to trace the people, ideas, and visuals that informed the poster movement. It makes no pretence at being complete or universal.

At every stage of talking to poster makers and activists, people have mentioned others whose contributions were crucial. Too often it proved difficult to follow up on these leads, within the limits of time and available resources. So the contributions recorded here can only be taken as sketching a broad outline. In time, we hope the many people we could not reach will be able to tell their stories, and fill the gaping holes in this narrative.

In the following pages, then, we will look at the growth of the graphics of resistance, as a people's response to their harsh realities, as an aesthetic vocalisation of experiences, hopes and ideals. We look at some of the individual experiences of poster making, as they fed into the collective movement. We hope, above all, to paint a landscape that shows us the colours of the ground on which our democratic South Africa stands today.

## ENDNOTES

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- 2 Nise Malange, 'Spring is rebellious'. In I. de Kok and K. Press (Eds.), Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990.
- 3 Thami Mnyele and J. Seidman, 'Review of Albie Sachs's Images of a Revolution'. Draft for Medu Newsletter, 1985, p. 5.
- 4 Pitika Ntuli, *Louder than words* exhibition catalogue. London: Pentonville Gallery, 1980 (JS papers).
- 5 Marilyn Martin, 'Arts in South Africa'. <http://www.revuenoire.com/anglais/S11-6.htm> (2005).
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Thami Mnyele at Culture and Resistance, Gaborone, 1982, photo by Kevin Humphrey