

'moma show raises questions about people's culture and art museums'

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This past year has seen the evolving fulfilment of resolutions passed by South African cultural workers at the **Culture in Another South Africa Conference** held in Amsterdam in 1987. One of these central resolutions pertained to the inseparability of art and politics, and the need for artists and cultural workers to organise themselves regionally, nationally and internationally so as to play an effective role in the liberation struggle.

In the Western Cape, the Visual Arts Group of the **Cultural Workers' Congress**¹ held a number of discussions in an attempt to understand in what way an exhibition such as that proposed by **MOMA**, might aid cultural organisation on the ground. At the same time political gains were counterbalanced by the identification of a number of problems.

It was recognised that historically art exhibitions tended to cater for an "art educated" public and that an international exhibition of South African art might superimpose criteria specific to such a viewing public but be insensitive to criteria which might be applied by cultural organisations within South Africa. This issue impacted upon the broader problem of the decontextualisation of cultural production. Being transposed into a foreign context and into an art museum posed the threat of cultural artefacts losing their particular significance. Removed from communities for which such work was made, the purpose of production might be unclear. An entirely different set of readings might accrue around the object, irrelevant to the original producer. Artificial values could then be substituted for the authentic values of the work. At worst, the item might simply function as a fashionable commodity. While this process of remodification is common to any form of cultural production, the specific issue raised for cultural workers in South Africa was how to ensure the maximum control of distribution so as to benefit the producers at a grassroots level. With regard to the interpretation of

these cultural products the debate was also perceived as a struggle to defend those original intentions located within specific community and social concerns, over and above concerns with quality and connoisseurship. On both the financial and theoretical terrain the struggle persists, and both are contingent upon collective action.

The visual arts has long been seen as an individualistic realm. This has often been explained in the terms that the materials and character of artistic production (in particular painting and sculpture) are more suited to individual rather than collective vision. Proponents of this view often cite the worst examples of didactic art as irrefutable proof that collective vision is banal or kitsch. But if we recognise the need to build a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa, we have much to do to redress the imbalances of apartheid and we cannot do it alone. The task is to engage in the struggle with the dominant discourses and institutions of art in order to restore the democratic nature of artistic production and consumption.

The **MOMA** exhibition seemed to offer the cultural workers the opportunity to embark upon a high profile international event within the possibility of a certain degree of influence upon the nature of the show. In organisational terms the exhibition was seen as serving three prime purposes for organisations within: the possibility of contributing to the campaign to isolate

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¹ The birth of the Cultural Workers' Congress [CWC] was given impetus by the CASA resolutions. It sought to facilitate the development based organisations, from which the Visual Arts Group was born.