

Gathering Strands

LIONEL DAVIS



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Preface

Art from the pluriversity of life: lessons to learn from Lionel Davis' opus

Patricia Mahlangu once wrote that Lionel Davis is a “graduate from the University of Robben Island” (*South*, 1989). Learning more about Lionel Davis, however, one soon realises that he is equally a graduate of community-based organisations and political struggle. The depth and intricacy of his work, his activism and tutelage since the 1960s bears many lessons for us today. This monograph, *Awakenings: The Art of Lionel Davis*, is not only a proud moment for the Africa South Art Initiative (ASAI) but also a celebration of Lionel Davis' remarkable dedication to social justice. In the context of counter-hegemonic movements against the stubborn persistence of apartheid separatism and the re-examination of institutions in South Africa, the reflection on the life and work of Lionel Davis is exceptionally timely.

It was in the 1980s when Davis warned: “In our future society, the wrongs of this education system will still be sorely felt. It is the cultural worker's task to prepare for that future society right now. *Ons kannie wag tot daai tyd nie, ons moet ons nou al vrek werk*” (Winberg, M. *South*, c. 1989). Davis was right. Today we are faced with an exclusive art education system that places less value on the social and political work that was done through art. Our systems need to produce more “cultural workers” and fewer individualist and commercially-driven artists. Of the many lessons to learn from Davis' legacy is that the political potency of art lies in continued struggle for social justice. It is not only in producing provocative artworks but also in producing new communities of shared knowledge (creating knowledge, teaching, and advocating).

Having spent seven years in jail and five under house arrest for his political involvement, Davis has shared his knowledge generously through his various roles at the Community Arts Project (CAP), Rorke's Drift, Thupelo, the South African National Gallery, District Six Museum, and the Robben Island Museum. These initiatives exemplify the kinds of art education fora on which we should model today's art schools. The principles of advocacy, solidarity, giving, and intellectual deliberation in response to prejudice, dispossession and injustice should still inform our art practice today.

Gathering Strands, Davis' retrospective exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery, is the panoply of his intellectual contribution – an archive of life and people's experiences in District Six, of prisoners on Robben Island, the events and initiatives of political organisations, and of the lives of ordinary people. *Awakenings* teases out themes evident in the exhibition and analyses the philosophical questions about power, the postcolonial, post-apartheid condition and kaleidoscopic identity (in the body of work titled *Maskerade*, for example) that are posed in Davis' work.

The plurality of Davis' oeuvre reflects his activities in different organisations but, more importantly, it shows that knowledge emanates from the messiness of life itself. Knowledge is seldom generated in isolation. To borrow from Walter Dignolo's definition of pluriversity as an “entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential, [which] is the logic of coloniality covered up by the rhetorical narrative of modernity,” Davis' art offers a fresh approach to what colonial modernism meant during apartheid (Dignolo, W. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, 2011). It is through artists such as Davis that we can re-imagine socially responsive creative knowledge.

This oeuvre is an invaluable resource to understanding not only the adversities but also the paradoxes of life during apartheid and in the current moment. Following on the research impetus of *Visual Century* (2011), *Against the Grain* (2013) and *In Print/ In Focus* (2014), the monograph *Awakenings: The Art of Lionel Davis* offers a comprehensive set of essays and visual material towards research and knowledge for social change.

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Lionel Davis at the opening of his retrospective exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery, 21 June 2017, the artist's 81st birthday. Photograph by Yazeed Kamaldien.

