



VISUAL CENTURY

South African Art in Context

volume three
1973 - 1992

Mario Pissarra
editor

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VOLUME 3 1973–1992 EDITED BY MARIO PISSARRA



WITS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published in South Africa by:

Wits University Press	and	The <i>Visual Century</i> project
1 Jan Smuts Avenue		Gavin Jantjes, director
Johannesburg 2001		Camille Collettsvei 2
South Africa		Oslo 0258
http://witspress.co.za		Norway
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First published 2011

ISBN:

Four volume boxed set: 978 1 86814 547 8

Volume 1: 978 1 86814 524 9

Volume 2: 978 1 86814 525 6

Volume 3: 978 1 86814 526 3

Volume 4: 978 1 86814 527 0

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Set in The Sans from LucasFonts (lucasfonts.com)

The *Visual Century* publication would not have been possible without the generous support of the Department of Arts and Culture, Republic of South Africa; the Foundation for Arts Initiatives; the Africa South Art Initiative and the Strategic Planning Division of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



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Preface

It is often said that national liberation is based on the right of every people to freely control their own destiny and that the objective of this liberation is national independence ... the basis of national liberation is the inalienable right of every people to have their own history (Amilcar Cabral 1966).

If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes them aware that our Nation falls short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him. We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth (President John F. Kennedy 1963).

Nearly two decades after the fall of apartheid, these quotations from the revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral and President John F. Kennedy have lost none of their relevance for South Africans. In the era of decolonisation, Cabral stressed the importance of history for the once colonised people of Africa, and Kennedy elevated the role of artists in the United States and elsewhere.

Even though these leaders came from vastly different backgrounds, their words register a common concern for culture. They highlight the value of history to the construction of a national identity, and the role of the artist within culture. They reveal why so much of South Africa's visual art, music, literature and theatre, is inextricably linked to the desire for liberty and equality. The notions of culture of the colonial regime and the apartheid government valued neither South African art nor its artists. British colonial culture saw little value in anything other than its own reflection, and the apartheid regime excluded black artists from any role in interpreting the nation's art history.

Works of art can articulate particular moments in the life of a nation. Not all South Africa's visual artists had the liberty, the means or the will to connect their work to the politics of national liberation, or to hold a critical light up to their nation's moral potential. But those artists whose work did make these statements have become actors in the making of history, and their work is testimony to historical progress. Whether a rock painting, a wood sculpture or a video projection, such works have provided insights into how South Africans view themselves in their social and cultural environments.

The task of the *Visual Century* project has been to grapple with the uneven flow of South African contemporary art; to contextualise the relevance of artists and their works to the nation's cultural identity and, where possible, to place them in relation to the history of international art. Providing a balanced record of the never-ending production of art is a difficult yet vital task in contemporary South African culture. The constant creation of images and re-formulation of artistic concepts make art history a fluid body of facts and ideas. Art historical writing becomes a topological exercise similar to mapping a river.

One can picture the history of South Africa's art as a river meandering through the southernmost part of the African continent, growing in stature as it glides towards the estuary of the present. It connects to the history of the world's art just as rivers inevitably connect to the great oceans of our planet. In the twentieth century, some tributaries of this

waterway have been navigated by historians, and the records of their journeys have helped the editors and writers of *Visual Century* to determine where the river has flowed, and what has shaped its momentum and direction. But these early records also make it clear that one cannot know this river with any degree of certainty. Even with the most rigorous research, its topology remains sketchy. Theories as to its origins and what has dissolved into its stream will constantly change. To understand what commands its direction or progression will continue to challenge the historians mapping it. In a postmodern age, we have begun to accept that there are plural narratives of art history, and that all history writing remains incomplete. Over time, we might trace new tributaries or re-evaluate the contribution of individual artists to its flow. But the true temporal and spatial parameters of the river remain elusive.

Visual Century is the latest contextual survey of the river's bed, channels and sedimentary traces. The intention is to take you, the reader, along this lengthy waterway, and to leave you with an imminent sense of arrival in a different time and place. If the limited page extent of its volumes, gaps in research or simple oversight should distract from this historical journey, I hope that it will none the less offer more novel insights about art practice in South Africa than anything that has gone before.

The harsh political circumstances of twentieth-century colonial, Union and apartheid rule often eroded facts and shaped cultural fictions. The interpretation of art history was forced into narrow channels conforming to even narrower cultural perceptions. It divided achievement along racial lines, and restricted critical engagement with the wellspring of ideas from other African cultures. The challenge facing the writers in each volume of *Visual Century* was not to only immerse readers in the turbulence of the river, but also to expose some of what lies hidden in the sediment.

The revision of the river's tributaries, started by South African historians in the 1980s and continued after South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, made it necessary to review a century of contemporary art. The predominance of Eurocentric art history in the teaching and discourses of art within South Africa also needed to be addressed so that a more accurate and layered map could be drawn. With the support of Z. Pallo Jordan, then the Minister of Arts and Culture, the *Visual Century* project was born at the end of 2006, with research beginning a year later.

The century under review begins in 1907, which marks the year the British restored self-governance to the Boer Republics after defeating them in the Second South African War. This in turn led to the establishment of the Union of South Africa (1910) that joined Afrikaner and British settlers under one government. The year 1907 also coincides with the epoch in which artists in Europe broke with prevailing conventions by assimilating African and other cultures into their practice to create European Modernism. Pablo Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) is one of the striking examples of this fissure, alongside Henri Matisse's *Dance* (1907), which references the art of Asia and the Arab world.

The research for *Visual Century* took existing and new material and located these in the context of South African social history and international art history. The prominent themes that emerged from initial research prompted the division of the book into four volumes. The volumes have an open structure that avoids a single author narrative. Numerous writers were invited to interpret these themes and, where possible, to redress the racial and gender imbalance of colonial and apartheid art histories. This approach matched the spirit of the project's intentions, which recognised that there are plural narratives of

history. It allowed writers to retrieve the history of South African art from the political doctrines of colonialism and apartheid, and to uncover its essential African character. By avoiding a strict linear narrative, the information gathered does not claim to be finite or absolute. There are overlaps at the start and end of volumes. Occasionally this open structure creates coincidences of ideas across volumes and different readings of certain artists whose practice extends across eras. But the multiplicity of voices keeps the project open-minded about the scope and dimensions of the river of history, and the need to review who contributed what to South Africa's art history.

Any text about art only creates new meaning through engagement and comment. The editors and I hope that the chapters in this overview will be seen as an invitation to further scholarly research. The nature of mapping something fluid is that certain issues and artists inevitably rise to the surface, while others sink. To broaden and deepen our knowledge of this river beyond what is revealed in these four volumes, South Africa's visual art history must be constantly reviewed.

Gavin Jantjes
Visual Century project director
Oslo, 2011

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Noria Mabasa: *Carnage II*, 1988. Fig tree wood, 80 (h) × 250 (w) × 200 (d) cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery.

Foreword: Art and human struggle

Art has always been part of human struggle, not only for individual self-realisation but also for the betterment of society. Through art one can look into the past, evaluate the present and determine a way for the future. Art history is therefore of fundamental importance; it provides information about the past, how human beings have perceived the world and their own place within it. This perception of the world and one's place within it has constantly changed in history, varying in forms and conceptions in different cultures and civilisations. But there is one thing that brings all of humanity together. It is the vision of the future in which humanity not only attains a level of material achievement that is shared equally by all peoples across all cultures and nations, but which also allows them a freedom to pursue an aesthetic – commonly understood as 'spiritual' – fulfilment.

During apartheid-era South Africa, this struggle was halted, and the progressive movement of history reversed to serve the interests of a small group of people who had obtained power illegitimately and maintained it brutally on the basis of self-proclaimed white racial supremacy – fundamental to Western colonisation.

Apartheid was an extreme form of the colonial system; it not only segregated people on the basis of different races, but placed them in a hierarchy that located whites at the top. This was carried out through extreme oppression and violence that degraded the humanity of the majority of the people. Although racial segregation in South Africa was maintained by allocating physically different residential areas for different racial groupings, this did not necessarily prevent people moving from one area to another as long as this movement followed the prescribed paths or the allocated social roles within apartheid. This created a space within which it was possible for the struggle for both self-representation and representation of each other to take place. In other words, what post-apartheid South Africa has inherited is not only a history of oppression, but also what escaped from that oppression, creatively.

Human creativity can never be altogether suppressed. What it produces may remain suppressed for a long time, either buried under the weight of an oppressive system, or as part of the submerged memory of those oppressed. The task of post-apartheid historians is therefore both difficult and manifold. Not only do they have to dig deep into the buried treasures of human creativity, they also have to liberate them from what determined, defined and maintained their expression and interpretation during apartheid. South Africa has inherited not an integrated single heritage, but fragments of a divided society. The task of historians is then not only to reclaim these fragments and re-assemble them into one history, but also to interpret this history in a way that removes what once produced fragmentation; not just by re-imagining the past, but by looking at it with the critical tools provided by the anti-apartheid struggle.

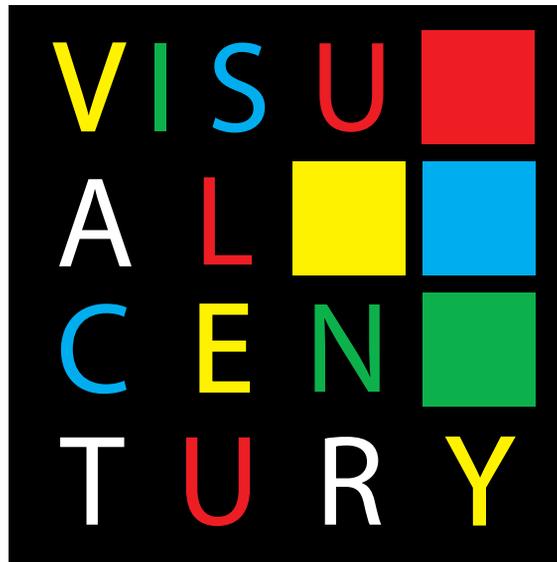
Art clearly played an important role in the anti-apartheid struggle, with its own specific tools and forms. But art always has a role to play in countering oppression; this phenomenon can be seen in all epochs and cultures. Even in an enlightened and free society, it is necessary for artists to confront dogmas constantly. But this is often pursued without changing or innovating the prevailing language of art. However, there comes a time when a drastic change takes place not only in one's perception of things, but also in how art expresses this change. This may either be the result of social changes occurring due to changes in the tools humans use in their productive work, or the collapse of the basic human values of society as a result of internal or external oppression. The brutality of war

can produce an entirely different perception of things, affecting the very foundations of art in existence for centuries.

With new scientific discoveries and the emergence of new technologies, things began to change drastically in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century; alongside this, there emerged a radically new language of art that laid the foundation of what we now recognise as modern art. It was an optimistic beginning, with a vision of a better future. But this vision soon collapsed due to the brutality of the First World War, from which emerged anti-art movements of the avant-garde with completely different art forms or language.

The struggle against apartheid was a struggle against a specific form of oppression and brutality, giving art a form that was specifically unique. It is therefore imperative for historians in South Africa not only to write its history, but also to interpret it in such a way that its unique achievement – social and artistic – is fully and critically revealed; and in doing so, to lay the foundation of art in South Africa which is its own authentic, modern expression.

Rasheed Araeen



SOUTH AFRICAN ART IN CONTEXT 1907-2007

INTRODUCTION

RECOVERING CRITICAL MOMENTS

MARIO PISSARRA

The 1970s and particularly the 1980s generated many memorable visual representations of resistance to apartheid. Many of these images are explicitly or implicitly violent. Paul Stopforth's *Elegy* (1981), Lucas Seage's *Found object* (1981), Gavin Younge's *Riot – protected pram* (1981), Manfred Zylla's *Death trap* (1985) and Jane Alexander's *Butcher boys* (1985–86) are among the numerous vivid single-frame indictments of the time. The power of these images resides in part in their mediation of horror and intimacy, and in their crisp visualisation of the unmentionable.

Still others succeeded in evoking the bigger picture by conjuring a sense of the epic. This is evident in works from the late 1980s by William Kentridge and Penny Siopis, which present images that, like those seen in Helen Sebidi and Deborah Bell's works of the period, are perhaps less fixed in their specificity than most of the works listed above, but are none the less deeply troubling or disconcerting.

The desire of artists to engage with a bigger story frequently led them to use multiple or sequential images. This can be seen in works such as Thami Mnyele's *Things fall apart* (1976), Paul Grendon's *Ons vir jou, Suid Afrika* (1985), David Hlongwane's *Mama let me go* (c. 1986), Bongwiwe Dhlomo's *The state of the 80s car comb triptych* (1988–89), and Sfiso ka Mkame's *Letters to god* (1988).

The development of bodies of work exploring single themes, whether informally constituting a body of evidence – such as Durant Sihlali's documentation of everyday black lives, and Paul Stopforth's works inspired by deaths in detention (c. 1977–1983), including the above-mentioned *Elegy* – or formalised as a series in Gavin Jantjes's *A South African colouring book* (1974–75) and Sue Williamson's *A few South Africans* (1982–84), along with books produced by photographers,¹ highlight the need many artists felt to think beyond the single, discrete image, and to draw on collective histories and archives as critical ingredients of a new visual language.²

With so much work speaking to and of resistance, to say nothing of the works produced during the 1990s that reference earlier events, it is perhaps not surprising that the popular image of art in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s is indelibly tied to images of resistance, and to the notion of resistance art itself.

There are two main reasons to engage and critique this one-dimensional view of resistance art. The first is that it fails to interrogate ways in which, apart from the use of militant subject matter, resistance expressed itself in numerous ways through the work of the period. As the chapters in this volume will demonstrate, overtly political subject matter was not always the most viable way of articulating resistance, nor was resistance necessarily aligned to a specific liberation movement. In addition, the rejection of the status quo extended to a critical engagement and even rejection of the institutions and practice of art as undertaken and understood at the time, and this led to new concerns and forms of practice. Failure to appreciate the multivalence of “resistance” explains why many works produced in the 1990s – particularly those on political themes, but effectively making sense of the past – are often presumed to have been made in the 1970s and 1980s.³

The second reason for rejecting one-dimensional views of resistance art is that these erase the fault-lines within the visual arts community itself – lines delineated by race, class, gender, age, and, not least, politics. Presupposing resistance art to be dominant and homogenous erases the instances of conscious collusion with state interests that did

- 1 Apart from books by Goldblatt (1973, 1975, 1982, 1986, 1989) and Badsha (1979, 1985), see collectively produced publications such as *The cordoned heart* (Badsha 1986) and *Beyond the barricades* (Hill and Harris 1989).
- 2 For Stopforth, Seage, Zylla, Alexander, Kentridge, Siopis, Sebidi, Grendon, Dhlomo, Mkame and Williamson, see Williamson (1989). For Younge, see Rankin (1994). For Mnyele, see Wylie (2008). For Hlongwane, see Bunn and Taylor (1987). For Sihlali, see Pepper (2009). For Jantjes, see Enwezor (2001).
- 3 See, for instance, Willie Bester's images of militarisation and conflict and Sam Nhlengethwa's images of casualties of apartheid's violence. This is not to undermine the achievement of these artists, but rather to caution against failing to distinguish between contemporary expressions of resistance and retrospective accounts of the apartheid era.

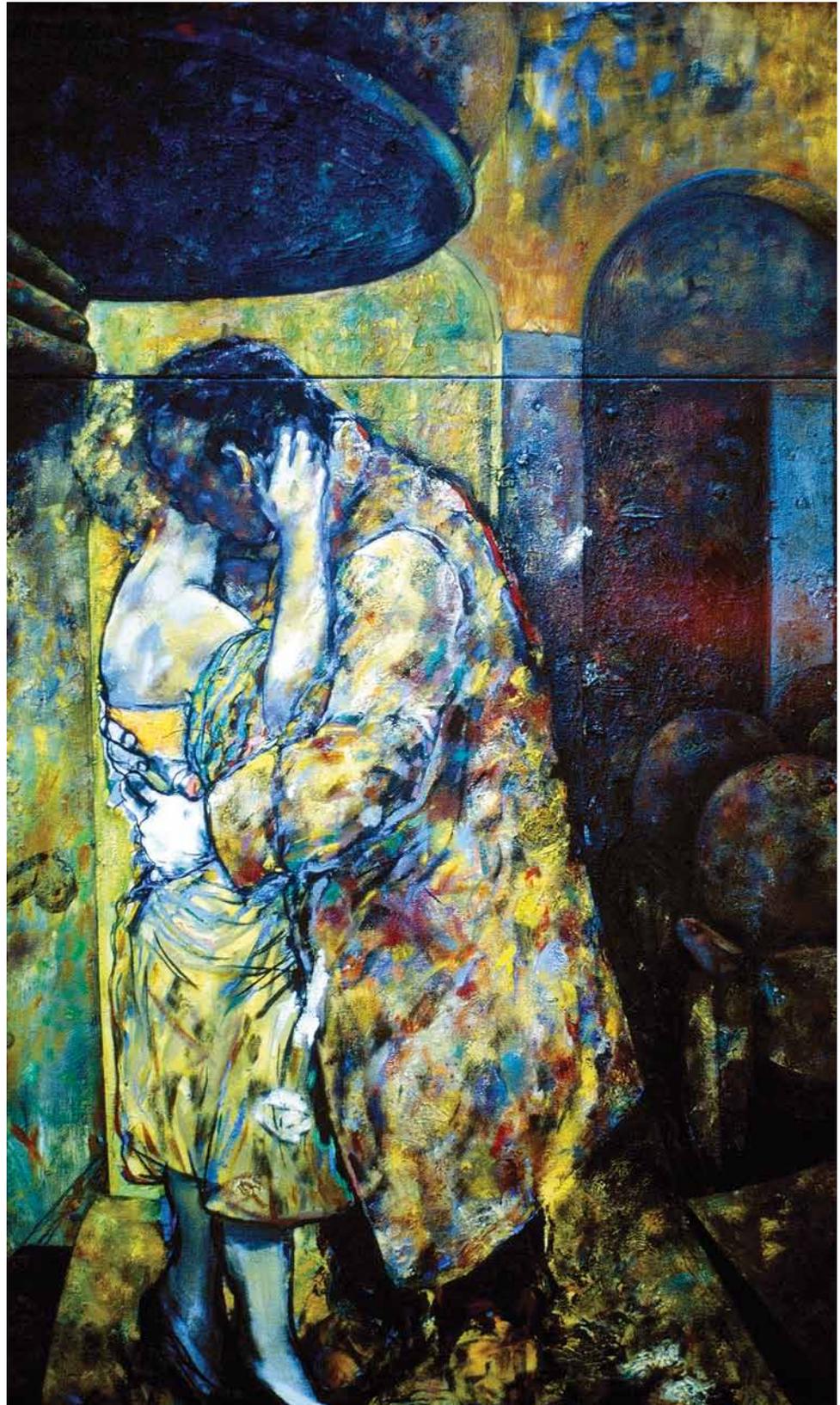


FIGURE 1. Deborah Bell: *Lovers in a cinema*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 165 × 101 cm. Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town.

occur, and conceals the grey areas between resistance and collusion, including unwitting co-option into state projects and disengagement with the broader struggles for liberation.

It is not only in the realm of art that South African history is reduced to a sound-bite. In popular history, the Soweto uprising that began on 16 June 1976 dominates accounts of the 1970s, erasing ‘lesser’ events such as the Durban workers’ strikes of 1973, and the beginnings of military and economic destabilisation of the frontline states that followed Portuguese decolonisation in 1975. By contrast, the 1980s lack an uncontested pivotal point, although 1985 has a fair share of events that mark it as a significant year: the African National Congress (ANC) called on the youth to make South Africa “ungovernable”, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was formed, the World Council of Churches published the Kairos document (signalling the influence of liberation theology), and the ANC also affirmed its stance on non-racialism, explicitly acknowledging that membership was open to all. The state attempted to clamp down on resistance by proclaiming a state of emergency that lasted until 1986, and which was marked by unprecedented mass detentions, censorship and a wide range of secret, often illegal, activities commonly referred to as ‘dirty tricks’⁴. Other critical points in the 1980s include the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, demonstrating outright rejection of apartheid’s attempt to constitutionally reform itself;⁵ the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1984, indicating international support for the anti-apartheid struggle, and in 1989, the launch of a new defiance campaign by the Mass Democratic Movement that crowned the militancy of the decade.

The year 1990 was a definite watershed, with the unbanning of political organisations and the release of prominent political prisoners including Nelson Mandela, as was 1994 when the country’s first democratic elections ended centuries of white minority rule.

Recovering critical moments between the iconic landmarks of Sharpeville (1960), the Soweto uprisings (1976)⁶ and the first democratic elections (1994) introduces fresh ways of looking at the new terrains of struggle that developed in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. These included the passing of the banner of leadership from an elder, professional class to university students,⁷ and later, with Soweto, to the youth, specifically schoolchildren. These new terrains also included the resurgence of militant black trade unions and the concomitant emphasis on class, particularly the working classes, and socialism. Alongside these came the evolution of non-racialism,⁸ the impact of liberation theology, the popularisation of the notion that history was made by the ordinary masses, and the growing influence of feminism and women’s movements.⁹ These developments all contributed towards a much more layered understanding of struggle than before.

The years bracketing this volume, 1973 and 1992, do not represent canonised moments in South African history. Rather, they suggest permeable markers within critical transitory periods. As can be observed, several of the events that occurred in these years had far-reaching consequences, or were part of a chain of events that ultimately became tsunamis of their own.

1973

It was in 1973 that Steve Biko and seven other South African Students Organisation (SASO) activists received restrictive banning orders,¹⁰ along with Marxist academic Rick Turner and seven National Union of South African Students (Nusas) activists. The symmetry of

4 See, for example, Potgieter (2007).

5 Through the establishment of a tricameral parliament, with white representation supplemented by the establishment of ‘Indian’ and ‘coloured’ houses.

6 On 16 June 1976, schoolchildren in Soweto protested against the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Their protest was met with police violence, triggering massive unrest, further protests and escalating police brutality. Youths fled into exile, with many joining the armed struggle. The following year the state clamped down on black opposition, banning 17 organisations and two newspapers.

7 This tallied with the central role played by university students in worldwide protests, beginning in Paris in 1968.

8 Non-racialism was boosted by the popularising, in the early 1980s, of the Freedom Charter, with its rallying call of “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white”.

9 Throughout the 1980s, the influence of women’s movements, including feminism, were increasingly felt, with non-sexism invariably following on from non-racism in the routine rhetoric of the Mass Democratic Movement. This ultimately informed post-democracy notions of redress, where women (regardless of class) were identified, along with blacks, as the beneficiaries of “affirmative action”. Feminism had made its mark on international art in the late 1960s and 1970s, but this influence only became apparent in South African art in the 1980s.

10 A lengthy and pointless case against the “Saso 9” began the following year.

banning black and white student leaders¹¹ graphically demonstrated the dual threat the so-called *swart gevaar* (black danger) and the *rooi gevaar* (red danger) presented to the apartheid regime. By 1978, the state was claiming that “the ANC is a front ... of the South African Communist Party ... this involves the subjugation of the black national revolution to Marxism-Leninism, and ... the net effect of a successful ANC revolution would be that a white-dominated Russian-Marxist government would replace the present government” (Frederikse 1986: 43).¹²

Certainly, 1973 was a landmark year for black trade unions, and the trade union movement in general. More than 100 000 workers went on strike in Durban and Pinetown, demonstrating discontent last seen in the defiance and anti-pass campaigns that peaked in 1960. Subsequent government commissions recommended legislation that paved the way for the emergence of giant union federations of the 1980s.

The year 1973 was also important for international solidarity. The United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity and resolved to recognise the main black liberation movements, the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), as the authentic representatives of the South African people, laying the ground for South Africa’s expulsion from the United Nations the following year. No wonder then, that it was also in 1973 that then-Prime Minister B.J. Vorster authorised the secret “propaganda war” that later became known as the Information Scandal. This would lead to his resignation in 1978, and the subsequent election of P.W. Botha, formerly Minister of Defence, as Prime Minister.

The year 1973 was also notable for showing that apartheid was at war even with Afrikaner intellectuals. It was the year that André Brink’s *Kennis van die aand* (published in English as *Looking on darkness*) became the first Afrikaans book to be banned. Afrikaner intellectuals such as Brink, along with business leaders, would later play a key role in forcing the apartheid government to rethink its intransigence, particularly in the late 1980s when delegations to Dakar and Lusaka to meet the ANC government-in-waiting became a frequent occurrence.

Major events in world history in 1973 included war between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the OPEC boycott, in which oil-producing Arab countries embargoed oil supply to Western countries. Also in 1973, the CIA supported military coups in Latin America, overthrowing democratically elected socialist governments in Chile and Guatemala. Given South Africa’s isolation, the events in the Middle East had little direct impact, although the steep rise in petrol prices would have been a reminder of South Africa’s economic vulnerability. However, the Chilean coup would lead to military co-operation with South Africa, and the visual arts would play a role in building the relationship between two international pariahs, specifically through the infamous Valparaiso Biennale (see Chapter 8).

In popular music, the excesses of the drug-fuelled, post-Vietnam rock revolution had drowned in the mud at Woodstock, soul music had moved on from Tamla Motown to more reflective interrogations of life, and militant Jamaican reggae was on the ascendancy internationally. All of these social forces permeated youth and black culture in South Africa.

In the visual arts, 1973 was the year of John Muafangejo’s *No way to go*, a vivid statement of dispossession and desolation – a call to his god that effectively questions his faith – evoking homelessness, banishment, exile, migration and diaspora. These are all themes Muafangejo’s transnational, colonised identity knew too well.¹³

11 This symmetry reoccurs with the murders of Biko and Turner, barely three months apart, by apartheid agents. Biko was killed on 26 September 1977, Turner on 8 January 1978.

12 Post-Soweto, newly elected President P.W. Botha launched his Total Strategy, which included the strategic development of a black middle class. The Urban Foundation was established with Afrikaner and English capital expressly to support this objective. This shift to selective black urbanisation represented a retreat from the strict homelands policy that, through forced removals and deportations, aimed to ‘repatriate’ the majority of black (African) South Africans to mostly desolate and remote so-called homelands. The shift towards the centring of class within the political struggle is also reflected in the declaration by the Azanian Peoples Organisation in the early 1980s that the enemy was “racial capitalism” (Frederikse 1986: 37).

13 Reproduced in Crump and Levinson (1988).

It was also the year that David Goldblatt published his first photo-essay *On the mines*, signalling the re-emergence of documentary photography as a powerful vehicle to narrate everyday life, and to give a face to the inhumane consequences of the apartheid economy.

Muafangejo and Goldblatt's works did not appear without precedent. Indeed, they consolidate a trend to produce politically engaged work that was increasingly evident by the early 1970s.¹⁴

The 1970s and 1980s as sites of cultural struggle

Certainly by 1970, any delusions South Africa's art establishment held about being removed from the country's political context, were being sorely tested. The consequences of being cast out of the Venice Biennale, the world's oldest and most prestigious biennale, were beginning to be felt, and doubts about future participation in the São Paulo Biennale, were creeping in. The notion of internationalism, ascendant in the South African art world since at least the late 1940s, must have appeared to be a fading prospect.

Throughout the 1970s, the art world became increasingly politicised. While artists influenced by Black Consciousness attempted to develop their own platforms outside the white-dominated art establishment, a handful of community arts centres provided a space to cross the race barriers. White students, through Nusas, tried to organise a national organisation of artists, but failed to recruit black members. In 1979 Nusas held a week of *Art and Liberation* events, and student activists were also involved in the organisation of The State of Art Conference at the University of Cape Town (UCT) later that same year. The conference passed two resolutions, one calling on government to provide art education to all, and a second calling on artists to reject participation in state-sponsored exhibitions.

These resolutions are commonly cited as evidence that artists were beginning to take a stand against apartheid. What is less acknowledged is that this event illustrated the racial divide in the visual arts – black artists were invited, but stayed away (Younge 1988). Neither is the extent to which these resolutions were implemented addressed. Sack (1989) links them to the boycott of the Republic Day Festival in Durban 1981, but the fact that many artists participated in state-funded international exhibitions throughout the 1980s suggests a significant degree of non-compliance.

The 1980s generated many landmarks for art, and the development of a more progressive terrain for artists. These include the Culture and Resistance Festival in Gaborone, 1982, which signalled the emergence of the cultural workers movement, and which, with few exceptions, had little overlap with the UCT conference, and the *Tributaries* exhibition of 1985, which introduced, among others, Jackson Hlungwani and Noria Mabasa to the art market. *Tributaries* signalled the promise of new inclusivity, bridging not only racial but urban and rural divides, the popular and the fine arts. The banned *Towards a Peoples Culture Festival*, organised in the Western Cape in 1986, and the *Culture in Another South Africa* conference in Amsterdam, 1987, were also important in signalling the development of an alternative "peoples' culture".

By the late 1980s, feminist and women's movements were also increasingly making their mark on South African art. Two streams became apparent, reflecting the legacies of apartheid, particularly apartheid education: white, university-trained artists such as Deborah Bell, Penny Siopis and Sue Williamson; and black artists such as Bongive Dhlomo,

14 According to Erica Clark, a sufficient critical mass of protest art had been produced in the visual arts by the early 1970s to justify recognition as a genre (1992). Non-racial exhibitions such as *Art South Africa Today* (1963–75) were particularly influential, providing an alternative to the increasing hardening of segregation that marked most exhibitions and competitions.



FIGURE 2. Sophie Peters: *Sorrows of the heart* c. 1989. Oil on canvas, 86 × 69,5 cm. Artist's collection.

Noria Mabasa and Helen Sebidi, who either studied at community arts centres or were informally mentored. While the work of these women is well known, it is significant to recognise that the advocacy of gender equality also found a receptive base in community arts centres, where artists such as Sophie Peters (Figure 2) and Tshidi Sefako produced some extraordinarily vivid accounts of violence against women.¹⁵

Art history also made strides in the late 1980s. Steven Sack's *The neglected tradition* signalled the emergence of the revisionist movement that has written historically marginalised black artists into the script,¹⁶ while influential books by artists Gavin Younge (1988) and Sue Williamson (1989) alerted the world to the rich trove of contemporary practice.

Polarisation within the visual arts played out in struggles to democratise 'elitist' Eurocentric institutions such as the Triennial exhibition, the South African National Gallery, the South African Association of Arts, and the Grahamstown Festival (now the Standard Bank National Arts Festival). That the art community was characterised by divisions that were increasingly ideological can be seen in that the South African Association of Arts (SAAA), headed by Marilyn Martin, appealed for support from the apartheid government to stem the tide of "peoples' culture" that was being promoted by "communists" (Martin 1988a: 19). When the SAAA criticised the designation of culture as "own affairs", referring to the racial segregation of art through legislation, it was because they wanted to recruit moderate black artists who could be lured away from the "threat" represented by people's culture (Martin 1988a: 19).¹⁷

It is necessary to acknowledge a history of fissures and divisions in the visual arts to counter the reductive narratives that suggest that artists presented a united liberal or progressive front during the struggle.¹⁸ The fact is that artists were as united *and* divided, often profoundly so, as other sectors of South African society.

Schizophrenic threshold/s

South Africa held its first democratic election in 1994, but the years that preceded it were critical. By 1989, the Mass Democratic Movement had mobilised unprecedented support for a defiance campaign, which began with organisations publicly unbanning themselves at a meeting at St Georges Cathedral, Cape Town. Internationally, 1989 marked the end of the Cold War. With the dissolution of the USSR, Communism was no longer perceived as a threat by the West, and with the removal of this bogeyman, South Africa was approaching readiness to embark on a new journey to establish a non-racial democracy.¹⁹

With President Botha losing control of the National Party in 1989, bolder political reforms were on the horizon. On 2 February 1990, President F.W. de Klerk lifted the state of emergency and unbanned political organisations, releasing Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners shortly after.²⁰ This was a momentous development, effectively legitimising political dialogue and opening up space for negotiation for the first time since the banning of political organisations in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the early 1990s represent a schizophrenic space. This transitional period (1990–94) was scarred by what came to be known as the third force, a shadowy, merciless entity with links to the military establishment, responsible for massacring civilians on trains and in townships, complementing the work of apartheid's death squads, trained killers who "neutralised" political opponents. Escalating violence between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the emergence of a paramilitary right wing, all contributed to a climate of violence and fear.

¹⁵ Peters has produced several works on this theme. The Sefako to which I refer is an untitled linoleum print in the collection of the Community Arts Project (CAP) at the University of the Western Cape. Of course, work dealing with domestic violence was also produced by men. Billy Mandindi's book-cover design for *Buzani Kubawo* ("Ask my father"), also in the CAP collection, is a striking example.

¹⁶ Esmé Berman (1970) had applied implicitly discriminatory criteria (solo exhibitions, for instance) to effectively marginalise black artists. The first writer to focus on black art (De Jager 1973; 1992) applied an apartheid-friendly anthropological gaze that portrayed black artists as primitive beings bewildered by the civilised, industrial world (Van Robbroeck 2003).

¹⁷ Similarly, when the SAAA "...had all run out of patience and endurance, and there was unanimity that we should seriously review and reconsider our ties with the Government" (Martin 1988b), the primary objections were the inadequate financial support received from the State.

¹⁸ See Martin (2001), Arnold (2005) for accounts that imply a degree of unity among the visual arts community, leading on from The State of Art Conference. This is despite the fact that both writers participated in government-funded exhibitions.

¹⁹ Many commentators link the end of the Cold War to the end of apartheid. See, for example, Abrahams (2000). That South Africa agreed to Namibian independence in return for the withdrawal of Cuban soldiers from Angola demonstrates the overriding influence of the Cold War on world politics post 1945.

²⁰ Several elderly and frail high-profile political prisoners had been released in the late 1980s, but remained restricted by bans.



FIGURE 3. Isaac Makeleni: Untitled (Mandela and De Klerk), c. 1990. Wood and paint, 30 x 7 x 2.5 cm. Private collection, Cape Town.

It was late in 1992 when Joe Slovo proposed the “sunset clause”, thereby offering a framework for a transitional government of national unity.²¹ The significance of this breakthrough cannot be overestimated, coming as it did after the withdrawal of the ANC from negotiations, following wide-spread violence against its members and supporters, unleashed after the ANC suspended the armed struggle. A deadlock-breaking proposal, the sunset clause epitomises the compromises that characterised the negotiated settlement, promising a peaceful transfer of power in exchange for certain guarantees to the outgoing regime.

The realignment of cultural politics was also a feature of this period. The 1990 publication of Albie Sachs’s “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”²² prompted debate on Sachs’s provocative call for a ban on the notion of “culture as a weapon of the struggle”, hitherto an affirmation of relevance within the culture of resistance.

The cultural boycott effectively ended in 1991, and in 1992 the term “arts practitioner” came to replace that of “cultural worker”, in a process originating within the influential Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) that would directly impact on the policies on arts and culture adopted by the new ANC-led government.²³ According to O’Brien (2001: 90), the politics of this period reflected “textbook ‘transition theory’” in which moderates from both sides establish a new centre, while jettisoning the radicals on the far right and left. He applies this not only to the political process, but also to the realm of cultural politics.

The transition from one state to another is evident in Garth Erasmus’s mixed-media panel *Subject to change* (1990), a work that hints at the implications of political change for art and artists.²⁴ The transition is also commemorated in Isaac Makeleni’s sculpture *Mandela and De Klerk* (c. 1990) (Figure 3). The front view of the work can be read as a statement of hope, highlighting as it does notions of reconciliation and unity. However, it also signals a transfer of power. At first glance, De Klerk and Mandela appear to have been given equal prominence. A closer look reveals that De Klerk’s arms are joined together, effectively tied, whereas Mandela is animated, it is he who holds the microphone. The rear view of the sculpture extends the partiality of the work, utilising motifs that affirm African identity, and words proclaiming the victory of the ANC and its armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe.²⁵ The representation of a spear along with a ‘traditional’ African woman also hints at the violence and the spectres of ethnicity and tribalism that marked the transitional process – and indeed continue to stalk the South African political landscape.

Thematic explorations

The chapters in this volume represent individual authors’ treatments of themes that were prominent during this period.

In the first chapter, Sipho Mdanda outlines how the representation of everyday themes inevitably reflects the broader socio-political context, more specifically the political economy of apartheid. He shows how artists used divergent modes of representation, including realism, conceptualism and even humour to address deceptively ‘mundane’ subjects, and how readings of such works unmask the extraordinary, even abnormal nature of lives lived by ordinary people.

In Chapter 2, Ruth Simbao explains how self-identification for black and African artists had to negotiate terrain precariously situated between the segregationist, ethnically oriented policies of apartheid, and struggles for liberation. She underlines how definition

21 This allowed for senior civil servants to retain their positions for at least five years, and provided the basis for the establishment of a government of national unity.

22 Sachs’s paper was initially presented at an in-house seminar for the (then still banned) ANC Department of Arts and Culture in Lusaka in 1989 (De Kok and Press 1990).

23 In 1991 Cosaw employed Mike van Graan to research cultural policy. This led to the formation of the Arts for All Campaign, which convened the National Arts Policy Plenary (NAPP) in December 1992. The NAPP launched the National Arts Initiative that subsequently became the National Arts Coalition (NAC). There is a close relationship between the policies and personnel associated with the NAC and the Arts and Culture Task Group, established by the newly formed Ministry of Arts and Culture, which impacted decisively on the white paper on arts and culture. See Pissarra (1993) for a critical account of the early phase of this process and the implications of the shift in discourse from “cultural worker” to “arts practitioner”.

24 Erasmus produced three mixed-media panels on this theme. The third is in the collection of the National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC.

25 Interestingly, the artist has applied red, gold and green, commonly associated with African liberation, rather than the black, green and gold of the ANC. This can be interpreted as associating the victory of the ANC with that of Africa and Africans in general.

from below, as opposed to that imposed by the state, opened up new understandings of resistance that are all too easily dismissed as “tribal”.

In the following chapter, Mduduzi Xakaza shows that critical Christian art produced in mission school contexts and centres such as Rorke’s Drift, as well as within the African independent churches, Africanised the gospel, making it relevant to the oppressed majority, and effectively challenging the church to implement its teachings. A host of sceptical works were also produced by independent artists, black and white, highlighting the links between church and state, and between religion and the economy.

In Chapter 4, Emile Maurice reveals the burden of representation carried by many images of struggle, which represent not only individual responses or specific events, but also narrate decades, even centuries, of colonisation and dispossession. The various vocabularies developed by artists – from the intensely personal to the overtly didactic – highlight how pervasive the impact of conflict was on the work of artists of the time.

In Chapter 5, Judy Seidman demonstrates how the very concept of art itself was a site of struggle, and that a younger, more radical generation rejected the fine arts in favour of community-oriented and politically pointed practice as cultural workers. She maps the alternative aesthetic that evolved in struggle, where images share an affinity with the politically engaged work mentioned at the start of this Introduction, as well as with most of the works discussed by Maurice. However, they usually marked new ground in their radical approach to material, form and relationship to audience.

Hayden Proud, in Chapter 6, examines a wide range of artistic practice that can loosely be termed as “emerging post-modernism”. He highlights how in the period following proclamations of the death of painting, photography and performance art became terrains for experimental practice, while painting itself was rejuvenated by its engagement with photography and performance. Proud reminds us that in a period of extreme censorship, universities, along with a few fringe theatres, were both privileged sites and relatively sheltered laboratories for experimental and engaged practice. Briefly introducing the Thupelo workshop, Proud’s chapter also reveals that the notion of the experimental was codified differently for white and black artists, not least because of restrictions on black students studying at “white” universities, where students and lecturers had access to more resources, particularly international journals.

In the following chapter, Roger van Wyk highlights the links between humour and the absurd or irrational, reminding us that the underlying influences of Dada and Surrealism linked the struggle for artistic expression to broader struggles for human freedoms. Humour also presented a shield from behind which the ‘logic’ of apartheid could be exposed as farcical.

In the final chapter, I look at the question of international isolation and cultural exchange within the period of the cultural boycott. I demonstrate the numerous ways in which isolation was ruptured, and highlight the interdependence of practice within the country and the impact of the boycott. I also look at the work of artists who left the country and question the extent to which their displacement or relocation can be read into their works of the period.

Collectively, these chapters demonstrate the convergence, concurrence and emergence of overlapping streams with multiple originary sources, united in their quest to make art

that mattered at a time when, from the point of view of the state, the lives of most South Africans barely mattered at all. This volume delineates a period in which the lines between art and politics, between art and craft, between art, graphics and photography, between visual and other art forms, were interrogated and crossed, briefly introducing a new vision of South African art that was complex and layered – certainly not to be reduced to an uncritical application of the term ‘resistance art’ that is then set up as a simple binary to so-called post-apartheid art.

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