Thoughts for Bongiwe

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Bongiwe Dlomo recently held an exhibition at the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery. When I went to this exhibit, it came to my mind that there is a new art growing at home. It is an historical event in our art that the climate there has developed to the point that it has given birth to a woman artist who can look so directly at the situation around her. Surrounded by Bongiwe's work, I could not help but go back and reflect on the growing of art within our society.

How can any graphic artist make public observations and suggestions on the state of the visual arts at home? The act of doing so carries with it the risk of implicating that artist as spokesman. Idealistic, perhaps arrogant. On the other hand I find it equally dangerous that we should carry on the wornout culture of resignation when major decisions are made over our work, indeed over our lives as a people. This paper is far from representative. Nevertheless in complete composure I think it is needed that certain things be said by the visual artist in my country. Failure to do so implies grave ignorance of those things which make or even can break our lives as a people.

Over a lengthy period of time I have been asked why, in South Africa, when whole communities are threatened with extinction by a soaring cost of living; when whole communities suffer disemberment through forced removal; when the broad majority of the people are declared foreigners in the country of their birth; when people are crudely and ruthlessly suppressed through rushed pieces of legislation, detentions, massacres of workers and students; when, therefore, whole communities resist this genocide through organising themselves into civic organisations, trade unions, women's organisations and student organisations; there has been disturbingly little visual arts output in the country or abroad which is organically related to these community efforts. Neither has there been a firmly grounded political voice from this quarter, let alone a broad art movement with an obvious national commitment. So goes the concern.

It is my contention that the prolonged strife and struggle that manifests itself in cultural work, namely in the visual arts, can be traced down to the root of the national political situation in the country. Any understanding of the development of visual imagery must therefore recognise this. That principle which governs traditional art still is valid today; i.e. that art must have a function: a walking song, the sculpture that serves as a chair, the majestically decorated houses of the Ndebele speaking communites. The subject matter is drawn from the actual activities of the people in the living surroundings, the source and supreme function of art. We may go further to say that the actual act of creating the visual imagery is informed by the community and nourished by it, conciously or unconciously, and that it is the community which will or must act as audience. Again we can take the risk of stating that the skills of execution, the intimate workings of individual imagination etc. cannot exist outside human experience, i.e. the community.

In contrast the development of visual art in South Africa in this century, or underdevelopment thereof, was shaped by the factors that wield political power, in defence of state interests. With effective employment of Capital and other means such as high technology, skilled manpower, the state of the arts was determined and controlled. Art galleries, the church, school, all formed and added the processing machinery, the finishing touch.

It will be noted that most artists in South Africa, like all the indigenous majority, seldom managed to acquire formal education beyond secondary school. And to compound the problem no formal educational institution ran an arts course, at least for Africans; hence, the responsibility was taken over by foreign missionary stations. It is important to point this out in order to understand the workings of the system at an intellectual level. Fort Hare only introduced the art curriculum in the middle seventies, and the course is at degree level, this means that even the highly talented person cannot take the course without a matriculation certificate. (Perhaps this has been changed.) Other schools that offer the course, like Endaleni in Natal, only do it without going beyond the mere level of crafts handy work, as teaching aids. The mission art school offered the course but also confined itself cautiously to the various art techniques and "art history", meaning European art history, with subtle avoidence of state confrontation. Maybe they subtley collaborated.

The art that sprang from this experience was seldom encouraged out and away from biblical themes, African landscape, wildlife, myths and legends. No explanation of the immediate social political phenomena. Where an individual artist dared attempt to reflect a political theme, treatment of this issue lacked depth of involvement. The work seemed rushed and lacked conviction. Sometimes this type of work seemed too self-involved and was devoid of that outward thrust;

it lacked an upright posture, an elevated head, a firm neck, and a tight muscle. Or shall I put it this way: the images are totally abstracted without obvious course, distortion of the limbs is acute. The subject matter is mystified and at this extent the work has lost integration with real things in our life; the work sags under a heavy veil of mysteriousness. Perhaps this is the essence of the work? The dissappointing fact about this approach to art is that the picture is deprived of that essential dynamic element: immediacy of communication with the community, the natural makers and consumers of art. Or perhaps the problem lies in that the artist had begun to look for a different audience, in the galleries and the critics who asked for "strange African art"? It is at this stage that the political motives (or clarity) of the artist are put into sharp focus: his class interests as opposed to those of the people. Art is not neutral, Dikobe stated.

The elements of distortion, mystification, abstraction, romanticism are not negative in themselves and can be put to positive and effective use, as in the indigenous idiom. This calls for maturity of temperament, clearer social awareness and skill of the working hand. I must confess that, in my opinion, we have not been successful enough in maintaining control over these factors.

It has become obvious that with developments at home today, the country is in grave need of a new calibre of cultural worker, notably in the visual arts and song. The one we have at this moment has yeilded too willingly to the dictates of repression. We must now create this new man and woman whose visuals and song will be roundly informed by the most pressing needs and demands of his or her time, place and circumstances: he or she ought to be articulate but simple as to be accountable for his or her work. The country calls for that calibre of cultural worker with clear political insight, a skilled hand and firm revovultionary morality.

And indeed, with the absence of this calibre amongst us, is there any wonder then that no collective spirit, no single-mindedness of purpose, no solid, patriotic, consistent art movement has taken root among our struggling people? Is there any wonder then that no union of the visual arts is forthcoming in our country? Is there any wonder that the exhibition of committed art that was being organised by Staffrider failed to take place due to the absence of work in this direction (see Staffrider, Vol 3, No. 4)? Is there any wonder that the art collective in Katlehong received Piet Koornhof and other government ministers as guests during their exhibitions? Finally and most crucially, is there any wonder that the house of the figure head of the art collective was recently petrol bombed by the disgusted community of Katlehong (see Rand Daily Mail extra, Oct. 5, 1984)

But there have been exceptions, those workers who suffer constant state harrassment, detention, exile, death and madness. These artists deserve our political support and respect. I must take the risk of including names at random: Dikobe waMogale, Gavin Jantjies, Lionel Davis, Peter Clark, Gamakhulu Diniso, Manfred Zylla, Bongiwe Dlomo and others. The ones listed here vary broadly in terms of both community involvement in their work and general political activity. But disturbingly, it was idiosyncratic of our artists that when they developed political conciousness, they automatically deserted the art profession for "something more practical and real", as one put it. This analysis is overcome with shortcomings, but it is understable. Dikobe, Gavin, and Bongi, like all artists today, have been taught to work too much as individuals, away from the collective. This must be resisted. The system of fragmentation, the tendency towards individualism, exclusiveness and isolation is as moribund as that of divide and rule.

In contrast, there are just the beginnings of a new approach to art growing, often from these same committed cultural workers. As the grass-roots organisations gain in strength, some artists are finding a new home for themselves and their work. Mpumalanga Arts Project, Community Arts Project, the Johannesburg silkscreen work-shop. We are beginning to see banners and posters and graphics in the trade unions, civic , women's organisations, the UDF. These graphics are the birth of a new culture, concieved in the hopes and aspirations of the community, nourished by the people's organisations.

Dikobe was one of the first graphic artists to actively respond to the demands of his country; and in taking appropriate action met with the heavy hand of the state. Dikobe was handed down a prison sentence of ten years for military attempts to overthrow the state. Before he was arrested, he stated with clarity and typical articulation, both the shortcomings of the present state of art and an appeal for the collective creation of the new cadre. Allow me to express my respect for this man. Allow me to express revolutionary anger at those whose racist deeds are depicted in the work of Bongiwe: forced removals, insensitive resettle-ment. We hail the fighting communities that inspire Bongiwe's work.

To Bongi herself I must point out though that her pictures need more concentrated working. The pictures deal with serious issues of our lives, but this is done with somewhat half-heartedness. E.g. that rubbish bin and the figure next to it (. . . an old woman?) are mere shapes, dead images. There's no dust nor feeling thereof, no wet — shall I say dampness?, no smell — shall I say stench? The work seems extremely hurried. What unsettles me is that the work can easily degenerate into the realm of the trite and defeatist "township art". But make no mistake, Bongiwe is a committed artist. In South Africa, where women are doubly oppressed, it takes courage for a female visual artist to emerge and assert herself like Bongiwe Dlomo has done.

There are ways, certainly, of improving our work, of destroying the negative image. We must change our understanding towards the profession. We must read, research, travel, and practice the profession in community development projects. To open ourselves to popular opinion from others and to take criticism well. To do practical organisa-tional work within the arts. We must convene and attend seminars, workshops, be they within or without our profession. These are the actual things which inform and nourish our artwork. Our destinies are determined by them. We must avail our services as cultural workers as well as members of the community to the liberation struggle. This is not a favour but a duty. And finally we must consider adopting the graphic technique in our work for its scope and elastic capacity in regard to the particular nature and size of the issues of our country. One other aspect in line with our efforts to develop the graphic image of our country is the usage of scientific methods and means e.g. camera and printing press. The equipments have to be conquered and tamed to suit our needs and social climate.

Apartheid is huge and ruthless. Therefore we must employ equally huge and complex graphic means to match the efforts of our people's resis-tance; to work big in concept and size, to organise around unsentimental principles. There can never be artistic freedom or freedom of expression from a people in cativity. This is enough to base our cultural work and organisation on. We need paintings and songs of revolutionary optimism, paintings and songs of unity between the old and the young, men and women and whole communi-ties. Let us dip our brushes into bold colours of paint and confidence and let us all attack our walls with murals, posters, writings, cartoons, all soaked in the conscious language of revolution. We must restore dignity to the visual arts. The writing is on the wall.

The thoughts in this paper are hurried. The situation that besets my country may deem this the green idealism of a slave. But to reach out to grasp this vision is our task and our joy, both as cultural workers and as members of our communi-ties. "Forward with the creation of a new calibre of cultural workers." This was the call made at the gathering on Art Towards Social Development and Culture and Resistance in Botswana in 1982. And in the land where the people have become actively critical of their enemies, like the Vaal, Soweto, Katlehong, Tembisa, Grahamstown, the demands made upon us as cultural workers cannot be more clear. Our people have taken to the streets in the greatest possible expression of hope and anger, of conscious understanding and wholesale commitment: We as cultural workers must join with all our talents and skills in this expression.