

STRUGGLE T-SHIRTS:

Public Testimony and Political Protest

In apartheid South Africa, the struggle t-shirt, along with other political ephemera – like the massive body of powerful struggle posters – became an important and much used tool of protest and communication. ‘Gender unspecific and articulate’ t-shirts grew in popularity with resistance movements after the watershed events of 1976 and gained momentum throughout the following decade of community mobilisation.

T-shirts are often described as walking posters with their simple flat surfaces that can communicate powerful messages. And these struggle t-shirts did exactly that, as did the struggle posters: unwaveringly and bravely infiltrating public spaces to communicate strong anti-apartheid messages, often a dangerous and illegal act under apartheid.

Rashid Seedat noted at the 2004 opening of the ‘Images of Defiance’ exhibition of struggle posters that ‘activists alternated between putting the posters up in the middle of the night when they faced sure arrest if they were caught, and during the day, when they could blend in with the hubbub of activity’.

But this is not an exhibition about struggle posters.

This is an exhibition about struggle t-shirts.

The anonymity of the posters, once put up, is in contrast with the implication of the t-shirts. The struggle t-shirt without a wearer had little power. Usually produced by the same teams, often the same print on t-shirt as for poster, the t-shirt’s closeness to the body produced differing meanings, risks and outcomes. The body in the t-shirt became a site of resistance, the physical self willingly identified in order to resist, and it was only in the wearing of the t-shirt that this message of resistance, solidarity, testimony, commemoration and defiance was produced. In addition, we cannot explore the situated bodily practice of an activist wearing a struggle t-shirt without noting that ‘there are no bodies in a general sense but rather specific bodies’, the identities of the wearer – gender, race, class – produced an additional layer of meaning and outcome.

What makes the study of these particular t-shirts, sometimes affectionately referred to as a uniform of struggle, interesting in their own right is that they were an embodied practice of public testimony and political protest and a powerful tool to actively forward the struggle.

‘By 1979/1980 people were starting to make t-shirts and they were becoming more and more available. So for the Anti-SAIC campaign in ’81 there was definitely a t-shirt. I remember for the Wilson Rowntree sweets boycott there was a t-shirt. When the TIC was revived in 1983 there was a t-shirt, when the UDF was established in ’83 there was also a t-shirt. By the late seventies, early eighties I think, t-shirts were already part of the whole propaganda machine of the anti-apartheid struggle and, as t-shirts became cheaper, they were used more and more.’

– Razia Saleh

‘Through the Publications Control Board, the state scrutinises protest T-shirts, banning some and charging and even jailing those who wear them. To pull on a t-shirt can be an act of courage.’

– Sue Williamson

‘We attended funerals and rallies wearing the t-shirts with the full knowledge of possible consequences. Wearing the t-shirts was equally a way of defying intimidation, harassment and even death.’

– Khangela Hlongwane

‘When someone is wearing the t-shirt it’s like a double layer. The t-shirt has its own message and it’s speaking, but then there is the interaction between the wearer and the t-shirt. And that you don’t really get in any other visual art.’

– Jann Cheifitz

‘The t-shirt forms a part of the political culture of resistance present at the time and the important tradition of visual resistance ‘that is historically specific to South Africa: the use of the t-shirt as a form of public testimony and political protest.’

– Kim Miller