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 articulable’ 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: unaweaveringly 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.