

Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo, Jeremy Silvester, eds. *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$70.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-905758-09-2.

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Namibia's History as Seen through Posters

On the cultural power of posters, Susan Sontag once wrote: "A poster aims to seduce, to exhort, to sell, to educate, to convince, to appeal.... A poster reaches out to grab those who might otherwise pass it by.... A poster claims attention—at a distance. It is visually aggressive." [1] Although she was writing about the role of posters in the Cuban Revolution, Sontag could very well have been referring to those included in *Posters in Action*, coedited by Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizo, and Jeremy Silvester. This book is a collection of twenty-one essays that explore the practical, political, and commercial dimensions of poster making in Namibia over the span of one hundred years. The authors address a range of issues, including the evolution of printing technologies and techniques (and the constraints on printing under political repression); the use of a particular vision of Namibia as "empty land" in tourism advertisements and the political implications of using such imagery to attract international tourists; the importance of posters as a source of knowledge in public health campaigns; the role of posters in constructing heroic identities of prominent male leaders; and the varied roles that posters have played during Namibia's struggle for independence and the nation-building period that followed.

This book is the result of a unique transnational collaboration between established scholars and promising students working with previously unpublished archival material from poster and photograph collections at the National Archives of Namibia and Switzerland's Basler

Afrika Bibliographien (BAB). This material formed the basis of four workshops organized by the authors: Posters in Namibian History at the History Department of the University of Namibia in Windhoek (2002); Posters at War at BAB (2006) and the John Muafangejo Art Centre in Katutura, Windhoek (2006); and Posters in Action at the Museums Association of Namibia (2007). The workshops were followed by poster exhibitions in both Basel and Windhoek. The book's essays ultimately emerged from this context, with each chapter contributing original research and a fresh perspective on the ways in which posters have contributed to the making of Namibian history. One of its strengths is the genuine dialogue that emerges from collaborative practice, though some essays are more compelling and convincing than others.

The strongest essays deal directly with political posters, the ways in which posters were used to communicate with, persuade, and mobilize people on both sides of the struggle for liberation, and how posters can be considered as a site of political activism. In "Images of the Cassinga Massacre—Contested Visualities," Nadja Borer draws on representations of the 1978 Cassinga Massacre to argue that posters functioned as "mobile memorials," placed strategically at commemorative events in order to project a particular version of that event (p. 141). In "The Struggle Is Futile"—A Short Overview of Anti-SWAPO Visual Propaganda," Silvester explores the varied ways in which Namibia's liberation struggle was contested in everyday life by considering posters pro-

duced by the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) supporters alongside anti-SWAPO posters, exhibitions, and billboards that were circulated by the state. Miescher and Dag Henrichsen's "Fathers and Sons of the Namibian Nation—Posters, Visuality and African Leaders" takes on the issue of heroism by tracing how images of two male leaders were deployed first during the "formative years of the liberation movement" and later in the strikingly different context of postcolonial advertising (p. 125). Anna Vogeli's interview-based contribution explores memories of the struggle for liberation and the effects of national politics of commemoration. Her essay, "'They Gently Bring Back Memories of Those Events...': A Case Study on the Reception of Namibia Day and Cassinga Day Posters," focuses on political posters that depict two separate events from the Namibian liberation struggle which she calls "focal nodes around which the national narrative of struggle and liberation is coined" (p. 154).

The efforts of dialogue and collaboration are also reflected in the organization of the book, which includes six thematic sections alternating with eight interview-based profiles of individual artists, printers, and activists. The book's final section, "Photographic Poster Archive," consists of some seventy images that help illustrate the workshops and exhibitions that provided the initial context and inspiration for the formulation of the essays. This final section also underscores the book's focus on the importance of spatial contexts in understanding the changing meaning of posters and their multiple audiences, by depicting historical photographs of posters in urban areas, at political rallies, and in people's homes. One of the central themes, as the book's title suggests, is a focus on spatial sites and viewers' interactions with visual texts within these sites.

This text complements the published literature on political posters and the history of those posters in African liberation movements. Given that most of this litera-

ture has focused on South Africa (see, for example, Judy Seidman's 2007 publication *Red on Black, the Story of the South African Poster Movement*; the South African History Archive's 1992 publication, *Images of Defiance: South African Resistance Posters of the 1980s*; and Sue Williamson's 1990 publication, *Resistance Art*), the focus on Namibia is a welcome and much-needed addition to existing scholarship. In addition, the book adds to literature on the important and central role of visual culture in postconflict nation building, conveying messages about political ideologies, popular opinions, and corporate ambitions—here, complementing most notably Okwui Enwezor's seminal text, *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994* (2001).

The book is an excellent visual resource, as it is richly illustrated with posters and other documents that have not been previously published. However, just as the text is enriched by these images, it is also constrained by them; the book's content is very much limited to and shaped by the holdings of the two archives that the images come from. In spite of the creative ways that the authors have approached this material, readers may want to reflect on the ways in which collecting practices and archival restrictions limit or shape research opportunities, questions, and conclusions; assumptions about history; and the production of knowledge.

Posters in Action will be of interest to a range of students and scholars of African arts, visual culture, and political culture, and to those who are more narrowly interested in the role that poster arts played in Namibia's colonial and postcolonial history.

Note

[1]. Susan Sontag, "Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity," in *The Art of Revolution: 96 Posters from Cuba 1959–1970*, ed. Donald Stermer (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), viii.

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