

He who laughs has not yet heard the terrible tidings
Ah what an age it is.
When to speak of trees is almost a crime for it is a kind of silence about injustice.
-Bertolt Brecht¹

What are we fighting for but for the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world? ..[and]..Let us write better poems and make better films and compose better music.

-Albie Sacs²

Culture *is* a Weapon of the Struggle

Siemon Allen

Some weeks back I showed my undergraduate sculpture class a documentary about an art project called HIV(E) that took place last year (2004) in South Africa. The project, realized by South African artist Greg Streak, included various local and international artists (from Indonesia, Argentina and the U.K.). These artists were given the challenge of interfacing and developing artworks for an AIDS orphanage in Kwa Mashu Township just north of Durban. This orphanage is part of a larger organization called Gozololo (established by Miriam Cele) which provides care and support for over 1200 HIV/AIDS orphaned children.

The project occurred in two stages. The first involved the artists actively making permanent works at the orphanage itself in Kwa Mashu; the second part was an exhibition documenting the project at Gozololo in a conventional gallery space in Johannesburg.

AIDS, as the film reiterates, is a massive problem in Sub-Saharan Africa with 5500 people dying from the disease daily. And while this is an unimaginable catastrophe, the artists approached the subject sensitively. Each of their works engaged with the site on an aesthetic but also practical level. A blue, multi-tiered, abstract, architectural form spread over one of the compounds to provide shade for those below. A simple but compelling gesture. Another artist constructed grids of seedbeds to form a vegetable garden, an intervention which, beyond its practical necessity, ever so subtly recalls its seventies land-art forbearers. Is it a garden or is it an artwork? A gray area in cultural production, but one that represents the aspirations of a group of artists determined to confront the difficulties of their social responsibility.

By contrast, as Virginia MacKenny points out in her catalogue essay, when this project reaches the confines of the white cube - the gallery space in Johannesburg – “the absence of Gozololo and its inhabitants [is] tellingly present. The objects in the gallery were quietly empty, devoid of their users, they had a pathos that echoed the reality of a world of childhood threatened by absence...³

As the film ended I waited nervously to talk about the project with my students. What developed though was a surprising discussion. At first people were just stunned with the staggering statistics and depravity of the AIDS crisis in South Africa. But equally they felt (as I did) a distinct bleakness or futility in the indulgence of their own creative practice. Many pointed out, like MacKenny above, that they too felt that the work in the gallery space, severed from its context, became inert. This, in turn, generated a discussion around how artwork functions within the stale conventions of the traditional gallery space and what exactly our role as artists was in society. Indeed when we broached this subject in class our common agreements were questions: what is the role of every citizen within a society? Why should artists have some special separate social function?

An important book in South African cultural debates, *Spring is Rebellious*, documents an original statement by activist Albie Sachs and some 22 responses from artists, writers, cultural workers and political activists. (Indeed, in South Africa, are many individuals who embody all four). Written for an in-house ANC discussion in 1990, Sachs' statement received “immediate, if controversial acclaim” according to Ingrid de Kok.⁴ Here he first asks whether “we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about.” He goes on to reconsider his earlier affirmation of “art as an instrument of political struggle” calling it now “banal and devoid of real content” and “potentially harmful.” He declares that “our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle.”⁵

As expected, voices of protest took objection. Many questioned whether such a statement would undo good work; others took issue with his assumption of authority. The specter of non-political art--creative endeavors that were unmindful of cultural conditions--must surely have alarmed many who had experienced the struggle of political art in the face of apartheid censorship. But in what she saw as a ‘tongue in cheek’ declaration, De Kok describes the importance of Sachs' controversial declaration in this way:

This ironic prescription is followed by an analysis of 'solidarity criticism' and the instrumental and 'narrow view' of culture; these impoverish artistic production as well as the struggle, restricting the capacity of artists to move forward to expression that would 'expose contradictions, and reveal hidden tensions,' and in doing so reflect the 'emergent personality of our people.'⁶

Sachs speaks to the limitations of political art, by comparing a gun with a work of art in this way:

There is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions - hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus.⁷

I return to these debates not for historical reflection or to defend one position over another, but rather because they generate important questions for artists here in the United States in 2005. With the events of 9/11, the US's subsequent occupation of Iraq and an electorate moving ever more so rightward, what is the social responsibility of the artist in this country. Carol Becker, Dean of the Art Institute of Chicago, often returns to this issue. In her most recent book, *Surpassing the Spectacle*, she writes:

To whom are we as artists, writers, and curators responsible when attempting to exist in relation to no *one* individual society? If the political issues in question are global, to whom do we express these concerns? How do individuals outside corporations operate as transnationals? Some who move through such an elite world of art, culture, writing, production, and exhibition seem only to answer to the art world. Even though the work appears to be socially motivated, the only real consequence of such critical effort is the degree to which the work is found acceptable, unacceptable, or exceptional by the art world, measured by the reviews it receives – the quality of the paper trail it generates – and the sales it ultimately accomplishes.⁸

As our conversation in the class tapered, some students began to brainstorm around the ideas that the HIV(E) film generated. Some expressed an interest in researching the AIDS statistics here

in Richmond, VA and exploring ways in which they too could bring public awareness to these issues through an art project.

This is not to say that all art should fulfill some kind of social or political agenda. Indeed much of the work produced in the film was relatively apolitical in the traditional sense. But more importantly the social relevance of the work was defined by the context in which it was made. Furthermore the documentation of the project and its dissemination generated a conversation on the other side of the world.

I am reminded of the success of Uganda's President Museveni in bring the AIDS crisis in that country under control through a stringent policy of requiring all government officials to speak of the crisis at the beginning of all public announcements.

Perhaps the role of this video, like Museveni's ingenious policy, was and is about creating awareness. In some respects this essay is an attempt to continue in that same spirit.

¹ Brecht, Bertolt, from his poem *To Posterity*, trans. H. R. Hays.

² Sachs, Albie, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", *Spring is Rebellious*, edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press, Buchu Books, Cape Town, 1990, p. 21.

³ Mackenny, Virginia, "Hiv(e)—The Art of the Matter". *HIV(E)* catalogue, project by Greg Streak, Pulse, Durban, 2004, p.9.

⁴ De Kok, Ingrid, in the introduction to *Spring is Rebellious*, edited by Ingrid De Kok and Karen Press, Buchu Books, Cape Town, 1999, p.9.

⁵ Sachs, *Ibid*, p.19-29.

⁶ De Kok, *Ibid*, p.10-11.

⁷ Sachs, *Ibid*, p.20.

⁸ Becker, Carol, *Surpassing the Spectacle*, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford, 2004, p.121.