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"COMMUNITY ART - STRATEGY OR STOP-GAP."

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COMMUNITY ART - STRATEGY OR STOP-GAP?

The theme of this conference is the rewriting of the Art and Architectural History of Southern Africa. Since not much attention has hitherto been paid to, either the received opinions about, nor the history and aims of the community art movement it seems appropriate to make a start at this conference. I need hardly add that I regard this paper as an inadequate beginning point. I have not been able to gather as much information as I would have liked about attempts to democratize art and culture in Natal and the Transvaal. Specifically, I regret the omission of attention to the Open School in Johannesburg and the South African Students Organisation's (SASO) attempt during the early 1970s to build a mass-based majority culture along Black Consciousness lines. By concentrating on the Western Cape I do not intend to privilege organisations in that area – the emphasis flows from my greater familiarity with that area. I am persuaded to make public a partial study in the hope that the paper will offer new perspectives on past cultural strategies against which the problems and proffered solutions of the present can be measured and evaluated more clearly.
May I begin by trying to define 'community art'. This term means nothing in itself. All art is community orientated and all art is accountable to its respective community. Nonetheless, the term has connotations of having a popular as opposed to an elitist appeal. Art as a form of human expressivity is common to all peoples at all times and it therefore appears unnecessary to start talking about an art which is universal in its appeal and egalitarian in its mode of production. Why then this sudden need to reorientate art with its fundamental premises?

It is my intention in this paper to argue that this perceived necessity has arisen from two quarters. Firstly, this necessity has arisen from within the ranks of those who are anxious to democratize culture, not by persuading more people to buy art, but by allowing more people to make art. Secondly, it has arisen from the ranks of that section of the avant-garde which has tried to protect their work from co-option by the art-market by making it unsuitable for immediate consumption. ¹ In the latter section of this paper I put forward the proposition that in the South African context, the notion of community art has been stretched to include the notion of people's art and people's culture. This notion has less to do with art's supposed fundamental premise than it does with a strategy to build a genuinely representative South African culture.

By analysing the origins of the community art movement in South Africa I show that its early base among intellectuals and academics has led to a situation where confusion exists as to the
goals of this movement. It appears that from many quarters the perception exists that community art centres are informal art centres existing on the periphery of the more formalised art structures. By emphasising positionality this model creates the impression of a threshold between community art and whatever else we want to call ordinary art. The rules governing that threshold, and particularly who may pass over it, are all defined by the more formalised art structures. Even if the threshold is defined in terms of aesthetic 'quality' alone, it is apparent that decision making powers are fully invested in the more formalised art structures. Recently, the mass democratic movement has flexed its muscles in regard to the academic and cultural boycott sending outraged shock waves through academia and the art world. Although this shift in power relations is still consistent with a positional model, I believe that the existence of another, more confrontational model has been revealed and that it is now time to assess the community art movement as a strategy for building a progressive democratic South African culture.

Before continuing with this discussion I think it necessary to examine some of the points made above. In talking about art's fundamental premises I identify two fundamental positions, that of populist art and that of the avant-garde. I would like to examine both these points of view and propose to begin with the latter. During the 1970s South African art schools experienced a wave of so-called conceptual art making, not all of which was formalist in orientation. At the Michaelis School of Art, school
project titles such as "Environmental Self-Portrait" resulted in pseudo social-science surveys\(^2\) and gave other students the opportunity to look critically at their social environment. Some of the work produced gave cause for real concern. I remember one young student at the mid-year assessment asking her examiners to close their eyes and to cup their hands in front of them. Taking a blade she made a small incision in her wrist and dripped a few drops of blood into the first set of hands. Naturally this extremely alienated act was stopped immediately the young artist's intentions became clear. However the antecedants of this so-called art act are firmly discernible from even a casual reading of various art journals. This is how Suzi Gablik writes about Vito Acconci's piece entitled **Trademarks**. The reader will remember that in this work Acconci bit as much of his own body as he could reach and then printed these bite marks on various surfaces. Gablik writes:

As present-day modern culture becomes increasingly depersonalized and administered by bureaucracies, some artists have reacted by producing works whose extremities, peculiarities, and individualizations are so exaggerated that they cannot be reduced to monetary equivalents.\(^3\)

I believe that these remarks have had the effect of legitimating alienation. Furthermore, by foregrounding art against a bureaucratic and depersonalized society, Gablik's remarks have had the effect of giving (young) artists the illusion that they can escape the primacy of the economic sphere simply by making work
which is ephemeral. Suzi Gablik knows that this is an illusion, indeed she even notes ironically that the nails which were driven through Chris Burden's palms, in another work entitled *Transfixed*, were subsequently sold through a New York art Gallery. Gablik sees the problem as lying not with the market itself, but with an art which prides itself in its difficultness. Bricks laid out in rows on a gallery floor can never have pretentions towards profundity for the simple reason that artists like Carl Andre expressly refute an interpretative reading of their work. Andre and other minimalists argue for a factual art. This art is 'difficult' not by virtue of what it means but by virtue of how far it pushes the viewer's expectations of what art is comprised of. Given Andre's eagerness to recreate his brick piece for sale to the Tate Gallery it does not seem surprising that Andre wrote that:

[As artists] We have always had the historical choice of either lying through, or living through our contradictions. Now through the genius of the bourgeoisie we have the chance to market them.

I do not mean to get sidetracked into a discussion of the dissonance of the avant-garde and would like to move onto a brief discussion of the other constituent stream of community art mentioned above. While we are still pondering with Ms Gablik whether modern art has failed or not, I think that we should note that she conceives that the community artist is the one type of artist who has managed to resist the corrosive values of the art-
market by offering up their skills in the service of the community. But Gablik also wonders whether community artists may not have moved so far from the art-for-arts-sake approach that they have finally become non-artists.

I have written that the desire to reunite art with its fundamental goal of human expression was in part occasioned by those who were anxious to democratize culture, not by persuading more people to buy art, but by allowing more people to make art. Joseph Beuys has made famous the maxim that everybody is an artist. The art journals have acted as a ready conduit for Beuys's ideas, ideas which have had some impact in South Africa:

[By saying that everybody is an artist]... I am merely speaking about the fundamental possibility present in every person. Thus I can substantiate that a revolutionary procedure can only arise out of creativity and from art.5

Beuys has now set up what he calls a "Free International School for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research" to try and realise his goals of democratizing art. Fellow students of the antics of the international avant-garde will remember that his first attempt to achieve this goal was actualised through an event at Documenta 5. On that occasion he took off his shirt and entered the ring with a Mr Christian-Moebuss. But his Boxing Match for Direct Democracy through Referendum was more than a popular side show in the circus of high art. This and other similar events underline the fact that many different concepts of democracy are
in use. The English critic Terry Eagleton has suggested that the liberal humanistic concern for democracy is a suburban moral ideology, one which is more concerned with adultery than armaments.

Its view of democracy, for example, is the abstract one of the ballot box, rather than a specific, living and practical democracy which might also concern the operations of the Foreign Office and Standard Oil.6

The concept of the community artist as one which offers an expanded role and place for artists was also given impetus in the early 1970s by the Artist Placement Group (APG) in England. This group was supported by funds from the Arts Council of Great Britain and individual corporations or government departments. Under this scheme artists would be seconded to places like the Department of Health (Ian Breakwell – 1976) and the Scott Bader Company (Barry Flanagan – 1971).7 In many ways this scheme operated as an expanded artist-in-residence programme, but one which simply turned the artist into a kind of consultant.

A few years later, in 1978, Richard Cork organised an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery under the title “Art for Whom?”. This exhibition suggested new venues for collaboration between artists and the community. The selection of bingo halls, public houses and football clubhouses as the new venues for art suggests that the answer to the question posed in the title of the exhibition was that art should be for the ordinary person and not other artists. Somehow the deep irony of the display of work which is
normally not exhibited in a major gallery was lost on the curator. Posters calling for Hospitals to be exempt from budget cuts and designs for murals may well be an expression of community and group experiences but they are likely to have made more of an impression on the hegemony of the state or art establishment, had they been left where they were in the first place, that is, out on the street.

Before taking up the question of whether the concept of community art ever intended to challenge this hegemony or not, I think that it is important to say something in general about the implicit ideological nature of appeals to the "common good", the "community" and by extension "community art" and "people's culture".

It is immediately apparent that the term, defined in this way, offers unique ideological opportunities to people on both sides of the political divide. Not only have left-wing artists invoked a broader public than might otherwise be the case, but the South African government has also been quick to seize the terminological high ground. The state department responsible for implementing the provisions of the Group Areas Act was, for a time, called the Department of Community Development. As we all know, this department was actively involved in the destruction of many communities. It follows that if one can succeed in promoting the interests of one's own community whilst simultaneously disguising the process as being of benefit to all, a significant ideological coup has been achieved.
But what is ideology? Ideology is a complex term and one which has been deployed in a number of ways - it is therefore incumbent on me to specify what I mean by the term. The meaning which most concerns a materialist criticism traces the connections between cultural signification and social legitimation. As a process of legitimation ideology works in three interrelated ways. Firstly ideology masks the relationships which maintain the status quo, beliefs and practices which serve the interests of those in power are represented as serving the interests of the community as a whole. Secondly, the existing social order is legitimised, or "naturalised", through a process which defines history as a natural and lawful progression up to, and justifying, the present. Thirdly, ideology masks dissent and other forms of social contradiction and simultaneously redefines these threats to the existing order as either treasonable, unpatriotic or containing a reversal of all values held in esteem by society.

Now, if we are to trace the connections between cultural signification and social legitimation I think that we are going to have to agree that, in South Africa, cultural signification poses special problems. Is there a common, that is, non-racial culture? The answer is in the negative simply because of the way in which South African society has been structured. If we cannot even agree on one public holiday how can there be an art in common between those who own Gencor and those who publish COSATU's paper The Cultural Worker? In an interview, the playwright Maishe Maponya has said that "...as long as blacks do not have equal rights there'll always be black theatre". Likewise, in an
article dealing with concepts of African culture the late Steve Biko wrote that modern African culture "emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression".⁹

This leads into discussion of the subtitle of this paper - Is community art a strategy for change or is it plugging gaps in the art system? If it is a strategy in a campaign to develop a non-racial South African culture, how has it reconciled itself either with government stipulations that culture is an "own affair" or the claims of Black Consciousness as they are espoused in the above two quotations?

As far as the first consideration is concerned, it is clear that the government is threatened by what it likes to call the "revolutionary climate" inside South Africa. In June 1986 the South African government reimposed a State of Emergency in an attempt to counter the increasingly organised character of black resistance. At the same time the regulations promulgated by this State of Emergency enforce new definitions of what comprises a "subversive statement". Section one of the act¹⁰ includes any picture, photo, print, engraving, lithograph, painting or drawing under its provisions and subsequent sub-sections spell out what is meant by subversion. It would be tedious to list all the definitions of what comprises a subversive statement, and I hope it will suffice to say that the provisions of the act are so wide that even the publication of blank spaces where material has been edited out is considered subversive.
early 1970s was prefaced by the belief that students as a group had obligations to:

pursue truth through study and the acquisition of knowledge; to disseminate this knowledge in society; and there to employ and act on such knowledge.\textsuperscript{12}

And further:

Believe that we are hindered in the fulfillment of our duties and obligations as students because academic and other human freedoms are not properly recognised in South Africa.\textsuperscript{13}

It is apparent that these beliefs, although not reactionary, do not constitute a plan of action. Nonetheless NUSAS was declared an "affected organisation" and thus prevented from receiving funds from abroad and many NUSAS members were acted against by the State. I do not intend to get into a discussion of the student movement but NUSAS's cultural wing Aquarius played a pivotal role in the incipient Organisation of South African Artists (OOSAA).

This organisation startled artists\textsuperscript{14} in 1975 by sending out what was called a "Message to the Artists of South Africa". This message was couched in heavily metaphysical language and resulted in a few dozen replies from artists who were interested in uniting "by means of a manifesto, those South African artists and
sympathisers who feel that the artist has a positive role to play in the realisation of the true cultural potential of Africa.\textsuperscript{15}

The minutes of the organisation show that OOSAA did not succeed in conscientizing significant numbers of artists. After a full year of seminar meetings and consultation with other cultural organisations it was still predominantly "a white, English, university connected, writers and fine artists clique".\textsuperscript{16} Although the organisation attracted members from the security police it failed to gain wide support from black artists and it was with some measure of relief that the organisation arranged a lease on the old Starke Ayre's building in Mowbray for what was called "THE WORKSHOP - Community Arts Project". By this time, Barry Glider, who was one of the key organisers behind OOSAA, had left the country before allegedly joining the ANC.\textsuperscript{17} More than a year later, on the 1st May 1977, the Community Arts Project, operating as a trust,\textsuperscript{18} signed a five-year lease for the same buildings. Ten years later The Community Arts Project moved into Community House in Salt River, Cape Town. Early one morning in August 1987 a powerful blast demolished part of the building and ripped out doors and shelving in CAP's silkscreen studio. Although this act of terrorism was probably not aimed specifically at CAP, over the last five years, CAP's Poster Workshop has been providing unions and community groups with the resources and expertise to design and print their own posters.

Over this ten year period the Community Arts Project evolved to a point where their stated aim of providing an arts resource which
was open to all appeared at last to be realisable in the face of structural difficulties. These difficulties cannot be overcome simply by throwing one's doors open. Structures have to be built, and alliances made, which counter racial and class ideologies which have been in place for a long time. This cannot be accomplished simply by issuing a manifesto. Perhaps the right-wing took so long to react because it took CAP so long to establish credibility for its programmes.

The world may have heard of Soweto and Sebokeng, but in hundreds of smaller townships, townships with evocative names like Ezakheni and Elukhaniwensi, Mbekweni and Zwelithemba, street committees have built up powerful organisational networks around the day-to-day issues of township life. Organisations known by a bewildering array of acronyms — CAHAC, CAYCO, WECTU and DETU — have taken the "struggle" into every school and most households.

In recent years, artists have allied themselves to these struggles and have tried to reflect political issues in their work, and to build effective structures through which a truly South African culture can be developed. The government's response to these attempts demonstrates extreme nervousness on the part of Africa's most powerful industrialised state and it also demonstrates how effective these oppositional structures have become. In late 1986, the Cape Town Arts Festival, which included art exhibitions, was banned in its entirety. It is important to note that the exhibition was banned sight unseen. This can only mean that the work, even that with a direct political content, was
irrelevant. It was the structure of the exhibition which was menacing to the state.

Lest this banning be expediently appropriated by "fine" artists as proof of their relevance to society I think that is important to state what the overarching aims of that festival were. There is no ambiguity in the background document to this festival:

With the present state of emergency severely restricting "normal" political activity numerous organisations have begun to use "culture" as a means of gathering and recruiting people. Organisations have been reawakened to the importance of culture within our struggle and [for] the need to assert people's culture.¹⁰

The element of strategy is obvious and the aim of the festival is also unambiguous – Towards a People's Culture. The document quoted above also spells out the aims of the festival:

1 to give momentum to a long term process in which the conscious and concerted building of a people's culture occurs. The festival provides a short-term focus in this process.

2 to further the struggle for political liberation by actively engaging in the struggle for cultural liberation, that is, facilitating the creation and
expression of emergent cultural forms, content and creative method.\textsuperscript{20}

The first aim quoted above draws attention to the "long term process" entailed in the building of South African culture. There is no doubt that the authors of this memorandum had, as an inception date, one close to that of the Congress Alliance held at Kliptown in 1955. Since that date cultural groupings like Ekapa, Vakalisa, Regional Arts Body, United Democratic Front and worker's cultural groups have tried to make that long process shorter.

In conclusion I would like to emphasize the exploratory nature of this paper. Contemporary art practice in South Africa bears the imprint, not only of a powerful segregationist racial ideology, but also the remnants of an imperial ideology. In answer to the question contained in the title of this paper, I have argued that a reading of the available literature, as found in minutes, pamphlets and brochures, as well as information gained through unpublished interviews with community arts practitioners, shows that the community arts movement is not so much plugging gaps in the system of art education as engaged in combatting those ideologies. As such this movement can be seen as a strategy - a strategy which at the moment appears to be directed at building a non-racial, democratic and progressive South African culture.

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