

# The Imvaba Arts Collective: A brief history of its activities and significance

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by Eben Lochner

As political conditions were changing following the unbanning of political prisoners on 2 Feb 1990 there was a sense among activists that the conditions and goals of their work would shift. Already, activist and Judge Albie Sachs made an infamous call in 1989 to ban the use of art as a weapon of struggle. This drew responses from various cultural activists that challenged the legitimacy of his assessment of the state of art in South Africa as well as his suggestion for moving forward. [2] Inherent in Sachs' critique was the idea that artwork representing the political struggle was somehow not appropriate for a new democracy. This was due to a shallow agit-prop visual culture which relied on re-using the same slogans for legitimacy and disregarded aesthetic quality. Examining the history of the Imvaba arts collective in Port Elizabeth gives us insight into the productive role played by artists in visually articulating vision for a new South Africa. In this article I will show that Imvaba's approach to art was not about simple sloganeering, but the promotion of a value system that was believed to be vital to a non-racial South Africa.

During the 1980s, art became a way to function politically. Since the arts were not banned, political organisations pushed their agendas through artistic organisations. When one surveys the history of art centres in South Africa, it becomes clear that there were many artists who felt that as the struggle against apartheid intensified, art became more prescriptive and shallow. In an interview, artist Lionel Davis spoke candidly about how difficult it was to produce non-political work within this climate:

if you were not flying a political flag, and making political art, then your contribution was seen as irrelevant. You could be painting pretty flowers, but that didn't mean that you were irrelevant to the development of young people, to the development of South African betterment. You would find that the guy would take his or her time to go and teach art in Langa, Khayalisha, or in Ocean View, making a valuable contribution... [but] those people were just as relevant, as the one who shouts "Amandla!" and makes political artwork. So I would never be dismissive of those guys, but those with a "holier than thou" attitude would treat those guys as irrelevant and treat them as shit. [3]

Concerns surrounding this politically-prescriptive attitude motivated Sachs' suggestion to completely remove art as a struggle weapon so that artists could once again be free to create as they pleased. However, his assessment that artists had no freedom of personal expression was a gross overstatement. As I argue in my thesis *The Democratisation of Art: CAP as an Alternative Art Space in South Africa* [4], art centres produced rich and diverse works of art, demonstrating that Sachs' concern that South African artists did not have the capacity to articulate the non-polarity of a democratic South Africa was misplaced.

This article situates the arts collective Imvaba, which was active in Port Elizabeth between 1986 and 1992, within the broader concerns and goals of the cultural workers' movement in South Africa. At the time, the role of the arts within society was often challenged, and many artists were looking for more socially grounded and socialist ways of using art to advance the fight for freedom from oppression. Those involved in the arts at a grassroots level challenged the very word 'artist', seen as someone divorced from the community as a foreign concept imposed by colonialism. They opted to rather use the socialist term 'cultural worker' as anyone who worked in the field of culture and was using his/her skills for 'the people' in order to align the work done by artists to the worker struggle. The difference between cultural workers and artists was that the former looked for ways to serve society with his/her talents, whereas the artist was only concerned with his/her own career. Lousie Almon recalls that Imvaba was a group of creative individuals, "who could articulate the dreams and wishes of the masses, [could] write about them, [could] draw them, [and could] act about them." [5]

Cultural workers were not only active in ending formalised apartheid, but were interested in establishing a new social and cultural reality that would be able to address the majority of South Africans. The art that was promoted by galleries was alienating to the lived realities of many. This called for a 'new aesthetic' that was concerned with the majority but that was nevertheless not separated from the politics of the self. Hence a new set of values was being introduced and experimented with. Lousie Almon recalls that, "We all felt very strongly that Imvaba was a structure through which we as 'cultural workers' could make a contribution primarily to the struggle against apartheid and the capitalist system. We...worked as a collective of 'cultural workers'." [6] The inclusivity of the cultural worker terminology meant that everyone could theoretically bring their contributions to the conceptualisation and creation of an artwork. Van Graan (1988) defines the cultural worker in the following way:

Anyone – irrespective of class, level of technical skill or function – who is engaged in artistic activity (including creation, performance, technical assistance, organisation, and administration and teaching) in whatever form or capacity and who locates his/her work and/or him/herself on the side of those extra-governmental...forces struggling for a democratic unitary state... "Cultural worker" is a general term (yet it is specific to the arts) and is consistent with other anti-division of labour, "socialist-speak" terms such as "intellectual worker", which refers to academics, researchers, scientists, librarians, etc, and "health worker" which includes doctors, nurses...and so on.... The generality of the term also works against specialisation and division of labour within the arts so that it would include those who create, who perform, those that administer and organise, those who work behind the scenes and so on. [7]

Cultural worker ideology was not only based on political activity but also on using art in order to meet people's social needs. According to Seidman, it was believed that the arts should build "self-awareness and self-image...create new understandings of our lives, and pass on these understandings". From this should come a vision of "how to take our community and our people forward". [8] However, as Lionel Davis explained earlier in this paper, there was a level of conflict surrounding the term as political activists saw the arts as a means to primarily push their agendas, narrowing the expected role of the cultural worker. South Africa was in a state of emergency

between 1985 and 1990, and the arts were therefore one of the few ways of organizing politically. With art, you could take your message across to schools, rallies, and the streets. Michael Barry, a member of Imvaba, remembers one individual who joined Imvaba who had no artistic inclination or talent, and Michael believed he was there to push a political agenda. Imvaba did not mind this since they were there to put their talent at the disposal of the fight against apartheid. [9]

When Imvaba was formed in 1986 it was initially isolated from the political developments and pressures in larger city centres like Johannesburg and Cape Town, and their primary focus was on art education and workshops for children affected by the 1985 school boycott. However, Louise Almon saw that Imvaba could play a larger role and connected the collective to the worker unions through her husband Gavin Hartford, who was the regional and later national organiser for NUMSA [National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa]. [10] Through this connection, and other connections within the community, Imvaba members made large posters and murals for worker structures and rallies. Naomi Mackay, another Imvaba member, remembers some of the activities they were involved in between 1987 and 1990,

we performed at a Cosatu rally at the Centenary Hall addressed by then secretary-general Jay Naidoo, among others, at the Cosatu National Congress at Nasrec Hall in 1988. In 1988/9, the writers linked up with Cosaw and set up a branch in Port Elizabeth. We also performed at worker rallies such as the Fawu rally at Dan QeQe stadium in Zwide as well as the Numsa building. Visual artists also participated in the performances, providing props and murals as backdrops. [11]

Imvaba became very active on the political front and the article in MOMA shows that around 1989 they did posters for rallies for May Day, June 16th, Woman's Day, and Cosatu. Furthermore, they also worked on murals with NUMSA, Cosatu, The Human Rights Trust, and the Food and Allied Workers Union. Whenever there was a need for a mural or a banner for any anti-apartheid union, rally, or organisation, all of the artists, students, and aspiring artists were invited to help.

These murals and big posters brought with them a level of political education. Imvaba artists worked with organisations who shared their commitment to a non-racial future of South Africa and their desire to convey those ideas in aesthetic terms. "Our murals have always strived to convey a positive message, highlighting worker and community struggles within South Africa." [12] The "Big Posters" were made with single faced cardboard and PVA house paints, which served as transportable murals for rallies, events, or as backgrounds for plays. The "Big Posters" were also removed after events to prevent vandalism or confiscation. [13] Not only were the "murals" collectively designed and painted, but served as a training ground for cultural activists, muralists, and visual artists, with time being spent discussing the content of each work. The murals were firstly discussed "in terms of their political message and how that message can be converted in a satisfactory and aesthetic way." The overall aesthetic, however, "was controlled by one or two people using the ideas contributed by the group. The mural was then drawn onto the cardboard rolls, usually by one or two persons in order to achieve a homogeneous effect." [14]

Imvaba also created art for, and with, the worker unions in order to give expression to their aspirations. Imvaba believed in creating interventions aimed at making art that was more accessible to, and addressed the needs of, a working class segment of society under apartheid. Louise Almon recalls specific examples of these interventions:

When we were asked to decorate the union headquarters in Perth Road, Korsten, we agreed that we would assist and work alongside workers from the VW Auto factory in Uitenhage. Together we designed an image with the workers from the paint shop; we created the stencils and the workers then spray painted the image onto the glass windows using industrial spray painting equipment.

Similarly, when we were asked to paint the inside of the General Tyre factory we agreed to do this as a project with children of the workers working in the plant. It became a series of weekend workshops where the children came to the factory and produced drawings which we then transferred to the walls inside the factory and painted them with the children. [15]

Imvaba had started with a group of like-minded artists who felt the need to use their art to address the situation in schools caused by the State of Emergency and the children who were boycotting schools. The primary focus was therefore not the political banners, but rather art workshops and education. Naomi Mackay remembers that,

The writers and performing artists worked with organisations such as Nayco [Northern Areas Youth Congress], breaking apartheid's boundaries of the so-called Coloured and African townships. We performed at school halls in Bethelsdorp and Gelvandale, at the Dan QeQe Stadium in Zwijndorp and in the Centenary Hall. Working with visual artists in Imvaba, we produced plays that reflected the issues particularly of youth and workers of the day ranging from the struggles against Bantu education, school boycotts and workers' demands for a living wage. [16]

They used the arts to equip school children with a political consciousness and a concept of their own capacity as artists introducing them to possibilities beyond the narrow, alienated workforce apartheid was encouraging. Imvaba did arts training with these children on Saturdays in New Brighton in the hall of a woman's hostel where they had many of their activities. While there was a level of political consciousness being advocated through the teaching, Michael Barry recalls that he also just wanted to teach art, and that passing on skill and opportunities took on a higher priority for him. Imvaba would take school children on busses to Johannesburg with their murals and have them perform at Cosatu conferences in order to give them exposure and to get them off the streets. [17]

Sachs' call to ban art as a political weapon missed the nuances of the work done by Imvaba and other collectives and art centres. Michael Barry remembers that throughout this political pairing, Imvaba's core values remained art education and the development of talent. During apartheid, art was not considered a skill which was worth teaching to the majority black population, who were instead given skills to be an effective and cheap labour force. The artists who did emerge were taught through art centres or through informal tutoring. Imvaba recognised this, explaining in an

interview that “art was seen as something out there, it’s only for some people.”[18] Michael Barry was trained as an art teacher, and, unable to find employment in the Cape Town region, he moved to Port Elizabeth. He developed a curriculum for teaching art to the children who came to them at Imvaba. [19] Imvaba had various departments for drama, visual arts, and creative writing, each with its own co-ordinator.

While Imvaba strove to connect artists with the broader community through its social interventions, a core value they continued to prioritise was to give artists their own careers. Imvaba saw itself as vehicle for making art accessible to the community, and they did this by making artworks cheaply available and by creating platforms for artists to exhibit and sell their work. Louise Almon [20] recalls that there were no commercial galleries in Port Elizabeth at the time that they could approach for holding exhibitions, and so they instead organised exhibitions in New Brighton Libraries, in worker union buildings, and in friends’ garages within the white suburbs. Furthermore, artworks were circulated and made visible at as many cultural events as possible. By 1990 the Highbury Gallery and the Cuyler Street Gallery were supportive of Imvaba and helped them with exhibitions. [21] Forming a collective helped with getting artists the needed space, resources, and mentoring in order to work as an artist in an environment which was otherwise not very encouraging. For example, having figures such as George Pemba as part of the collective helped raise the profile of exhibitions and allowed younger artists to gain more exposure. Naomi Mackay explains that, “Chiefly, the aim of Imvaba was to take art to the people. It was to give exposure to people who were already artists and to develop new artists.” [22]

In 1990 Imvaba attended the ANC’s Zabalaza festival in London, which continued to promote the role of arts within South Africa. Imvaba tried to implement some of the things promoted at Zabalaza, but the realities at home were different. After the Cold War there were a number of developments within South Africa and within Europe which redirected funds that were being used by the arts to other areas. South Africa saw a number of NGOs involved in grassroots anti-apartheid activities close due to lack of funding due to the release of political prisoners. There was no longer a need to function underground politically and with the fight against apartheid at its end the services of these NGOs were marginalised. Imvaba continued with its founding goals of creating opportunities for artists and had exhibitions at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 1990 and 1991. They also helped a number of students who did not have high school certification to get into technikons by certifying them through new channels created by the government. By 1992 Imvaba had dissolved, but they joined other organisations with similar goals within Port Elizabeth wherein they continued to draw on the connections established by Imvaba. Michael Barry recalls becoming part of the PE Art Project [23] and Louise Almon worked with the Art Teachers Initiative, which focused on art teaching in primary schools. [24] While Sachs was not responsible for the untenable funding situation arts organisations found themselves in, Gerhard Hagg [2010: 167-168] writes that Sachs’ views, “became the basis for subsequent ANC cultural policies” [25] which were more concerned with job creation and certification than meeting social needs through art. While this approach was supported by many art centres who tried to comply with the new direction, they found themselves marginalised.

When speaking to Louise Almon about the purpose of Imvaba, I asked whether the goal was “freedom of expression” by giving everyone the ability to express themselves and their values through art. She corrected me, and remembered that they were more concerned with “freedom from oppression”. [26] Bearing in mind the socialist values held by Imvaba and the responses to Sachs’ paper *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom*, it appears that the idea of what freedom from oppression would look like was very different from the capitalist system we got, which saw a lot of art centres and other NGOs closing due to lack of funding. Louise Almon recalls how they felt about creativity and society at the time:

We felt strongly that there was going to be socialist government that would come into being or should come into being...We would have had far more collectives where people could have actually participated in a far more creative way...We wanted every creative person to have the opportunity, to have the materials, the space, and the wherewithal to contribute to making society a better place. [27]

The values held by the cultural workers’ movement stressed freedom from apartheid in all its implications, including the alienation of the workforce, who were stripped of their humanity. The lasting significance of Imvaba lies in how they sought to counter the alienation and dehumanising effects of apartheid through creativity. They sought to express the concerns of the poor through writing, drama, and visual art, as well as working with the marginalised to give expression to their aspirations in ways nobody else in the Eastern Cape did at the time. They also opened up possibilities for creativity within the community through their exhibitions and training of artists, which went far beyond the limitations imposed on the black population by apartheid. The values and ideals held by Imvaba were not merely the agit-prop feared by Sachs, but rather an engaged debate about which values are needed for a new South Africa, and their approach to art remains an important means to explore the values we need for an egalitarian society today.

*Eben Lochner is a freelance writer with a Masters degree in the history of community arts in South Africa*

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#### Notes.

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[2] See De Kok, I. and Press, K. (eds) 1990. *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about cultural freedom* by Albie Sachs and respondents (Cape Town: Buchu Books).

[3] Personal interview with Lionel Davis. Muizenberg, 02 Feb 2010.

- [4] Lochner, E. 2011. *The Democratisation of Art: Cap as an Alternative Art Space in South Africa* (South Africa: Rhodes University Thesis)
- [5] Personal interview with Louise Almon. Johannesburg, Sept 2012.
- [6] E-mail correspondence with Louise Almon 6 Dec 2017 – 22 Mar 2018
- [7] Van Graan. 1988. *The Cultural Worker*. Not Published, found in CAP archived material lodged in University of Cape Town's Manuscripts & Archives Department. Archive NO: BC1195, A, Mission statement and history
- [8] Seidman, J. 2007. *Red on Black: The Story of the South African Poster Movement* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, Johannesburg), 72.
- [9] Telephonic Interview with Michael Barry 9 March 2018
- [10] E-mail correspondence with Louise Almon 6 Dec 2017 – 22 Mar 2018
- [11] E-mail correspondence with Naomi Mackay 27 March 2018
- [12] Imvaba Artists' Group (1990) "Imvaba and the big posters" in David Elliott (ed.) *Art from South Africa, Museum of Modern Art* (Oxford), 81.
- [13] Seidman, J. 2007. "Imvaba Arts Association in the Eastern Cape" in J. Seidman *Red on Black: The Story of the South African Poster Movement*, (Johannesburg: STE Publishers), 198 – 199.
- [14] Imvaba Artists' Group (1990) "Imvaba and the big posters" in David Elliott (ed.) *Art from South Africa, Museum of Modern Art*, Oxford, p.81
- [15] E-mail correspondence with Louise Almon 6 Dec 2017 – 22 Mar 2018
- [16] E-mail correspondence with Naomi Mackay 27 March 2018
- [17] Telephonic Interview with Michael Barry. 9 March 2018
- [18] Pissarra, M., Mackay, N., Barry, M., Pemba, I., Sapeta, D., unedited transcript of Imvaba roundtable discussion, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 10 Aug 2017
- [19] Telephonic Interview with Michael Barry. 9 March 2018
- [20] E-mail correspondence with Louise Almon 6 Dec 2017 – 22 Mar 2018
- [21] Telephonic Interview with Louise Almon. 26 Mar 2018
- [22] Pissarra, M., Mackay, N., Barry, M., Pemba, I., Sapeta, D., unedited transcript of Imvaba roundtable discussion, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, 10 Aug 2017
- [23] Telephonic Interview with Michael Barry. 26 March 2018
- [24] Telephonic Interview with Louise Almon. 26 Mar 2018
- [25] Hagg, G. 2010. "The state and community arts centres in a society in transformation: The South African case" *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 13 (2), 167-168.
- [26] Personal interview with Louise Almon. Johannesburg, Sept 2012.
- [27] Personal interview with Louise Almon. Johannesburg, Sept 2012.