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HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Can the Visual Arts Make a Difference?

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It is probably art historically and theoretically – and politically – incorrect to start a paper by quoting Clement Greenberg, arguably the pre-eminent art critic of the twentieth century, but one who has been out of favour for some time. I have indeed questioned my decision to do so and I hope that at the end of this chapter, you and I will understand why. I suspect that it has to do with my strong sense that art is undergoing profound changes, that we are experiencing the swing of the pendulum that characterizes the history and theory of aesthetic production – from romanticism to classicism, from the linear to the painterly, from figuration to abstraction. Being somewhat disconcerted by signs of a return to abstract painting must have made me receptive to Greenberg’s words that I read recently.

I say that if you have to choose between life and happiness or art, always choose life and happiness. Art solves nothing, either for the artist himself or for those who receive his art. Art shouldn’t be over-rated. It started to be in the late eighteenth century, and definitely was in the nineteenth. The Germans started the business of assessing the worth of a society by the quality of art it produced. But the quality of art produced in a society does not necessarily – or maybe seldom – reflects the degree of well being enjoyed by most of its members. And well being comes first. I deplore the tendency to over-value art. (Accone, 2002)¹

As a firm and committed believer in the potential of art as a transformative power in society, I was taken aback by the bluntness of Greenberg’s statement. Why does one have to choose between art and life? Are they not one and the same thing? In South Africa we have not assessed the worth of our society by the quality of art produced (art is...
simply not that important), but rather the quality of the art in relation to society and in particular the extent to which art is a reflection of, and a catalyst within, society. We know that art played a role both inside and outside South Africa in the struggle for political liberation, beginning with Dumile Feni (1939–91) in the 1960s. The 1980s saw the production of an extraordinary body of work stimulated by opposition to apartheid and made in the face of adversity. Artists found technical, formal and expressive ways to engage political and social questions, affirming that art and culture can interrogate centralized processes and develop ideas and metaphors that can influence and change society. It made the world sit up and take notice. The cultural and academic boycott was highly successful in isolating South Africa from the rest of the world. I can release Greenberg’s modernist, formalist statement that ‘art solves nothing’ and let it go, for I know that art does offer solutions.

What concerned me deeply about Greenberg’s ideas was his comment on the relationship between the quality of art produced in a society and the extent to which it reflects the degree of well-being enjoyed by the majority. South African art started coming into its own during the darkest years of oppression. Since April 1994, when the first democratic elections were held, South African artists have participated in exhibitions, art biennials and festivals throughout the world, and individuals like David Goldblatt and William Kentridge have been honoured with retrospective exhibitions in major institutions in the United States and elsewhere. Never has the reputation of our visual art been greater and the aesthetic production as sought after as it is right now.

Yet we are a society deeply flawed and in serious trouble. Everybody has twice had the chance to vote, human rights are enshrined in the constitution and education is available to all. But the cultural topography of segregation and division, privilege and deprivation has in many cases endured without change, and the shift in political power has not brought economic empowerment. More than a million jobs have been lost since 1994. The white minority, together with a black elite, control the economy, while the majority of South Africans are sinking into the quicksand of poverty and are unable to realize their constitutional rights. A dominant culture of greed and profligacy has emerged, fuelled by a macroeconomic policy that seeks to make the South African economy competitive in the international arena, but that cannot meaningfully address the inherited inequities of the apartheid system, let alone transform them. The health and education sectors are in crisis and violent crime, financial fraud, corruption, drug dealing, homelessness, child prostitution, rape, xenophobia and racism plague the country.