O N L I B E R A T I O N, A R T S A N D C U L T U R A L I M P E R I A L I S M

a conversation between SUSAN SONTAG, VYTAUTAS LANDSBERGIS, NAM JUNE PAIK, and JONAS MEKAS

Edited by Jonas Mekas

ON BOB DYLAN, BOSNIA, CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, FLUXUS, AMERICAN INTELLECTUALS & KARL MARX, CONTRAPUNTAL PIANO PIECES FOR NEW PIANISTS, SEOUL OLYMPICS AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION, AND THE UNGRATEFULNESS OF AMERICA TO A MAN WHO SAVED IT TRILLIONS OF DOLLARS

a conversation between:

VYTAUTAS LANDSBERGIS -- the first President of free Lithuania;

SUSAN SONTAG -- the writer who gave her heart to Sarajevo;

NAM JUNE PAIK -- video art wizzard and Fluxus politician;

JONAS MEKAS -- film-maker/poet, for seventeen years wrote Movie Journal column for V.Voice...

This October and November the SeOUL/NYmAX festival took place at the Judsom Memorial Church and Anthology Film Archives. The main emphasis of the festival was the avantgarde arts of South Korea, and a reunion of the international family of Fluxus artists. This reunion included Vytautas Landsbergis, the first President of the free Lithuania, the only member of the Fluxus movement in the Soviet Union, the man who faced Gorbachev and didn't blink and thus started the downfall of the Soviet Union.

These are some of the conversations that took place between Mr.Landsbergis, Susan Sontag, Nam June Paik ~~and Charlotte Moorman~~ and Jonas Mekas.

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About the ungratefulness of America

NAM JUNE PAIK: I am angry that Americans have forgotten you. You understand? You see, Americans saved trillions of dollars in defense budget, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

VYTAUTAS LANDSBERGIS: Yes, I think so (laughs).

PAIK: Also, Americans will make billions in all the oil fields, in Kazakhstan, you know, and from diamonds in Irkutsk. And you are one of the four guys who did it. Walesa, you, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Four. Only four. And you were the one who stuck your neck out most. You were the one who was most vulnerable, you know? Yesterday, you said that it was a question of dignity. And it was. But death and torture was waiting for you too, and you knew it. Koreans also know how to die. But we are lucky: we die without being beaten to death. Gorbachev had his KGB, Yeltsin had his Party. You were the only one with no real power backing you. So you were the most courageous guy, you know? And I was trying to sell your piano concert at the Judson Memorial Church to the American media. And nobody came, nobody responded, nobody wrote about your coming. I will simply say, that Americans are ungrateful sonafabitches (laughs).

America gives Lithuania to Germany, then to Russia, so they don't have to worry about it: Lithuanians are

troublemakers. The same they did with Korea [illegible] -- [illegible] when Korea made problems, they gave half of it to Stalin. You see, it's all megaeconomy. They can not deal with the small guys, so they get rid of them. [illegible] But sometimes the small guy can change the world. You did it. They wanted to give you Nobel Peace Prize, they ended up by giving it to Gorbachev... Vyt Bakaitis, the poet, said yesterday: the media would like you better, if your name would be shorter, if they wouldn't need ~~to~~ two columns... Vyt instead of Vytautas. Like Vyt Gerulaitis...

When I was a small child, growing up in Korea, and was looking at the world globe, I was always looking at [illegible] Guinea, at one end of the world, it was the smallest in that part of the world; and Lithuania, the Baltic countries which were on the other side of the globe, same size as Korea... Guinea and Lithuania... two smallest entities, you know? Korea is one third of Japan, and 3% of China... In Asian standards Korea is small.

LANDSBERGIS: I have tried to explain to the politicians, what you just said, about the great savings for them in military budget, and that they could help us immediately. But they didn't do anything.

PAIK: Yes, because Americans make money in defense. So that's a double-edged sword, you know? They need some

little enemies... to keep the industry going. Still, it's a tremendous saving.

Which year -- 1988, 89 it became clear to you that you'll overcome Soviets?

LANDSBERGIS: It was the establishing of the liberation movement Sajudis as a mass movement, and it was the summer of 1988. One year before the fall of the Wall.

PAIK: When did you become leader of the liberation movement?

LANDSBERGIS: It was in November of 1988. The movement of Sajudis was established in June. Initially, there was no chairman, only the council, but soon we became an official opposition to the official ruling communist party. And being accused, and having confrontations in the streets, and having to make many quick decisions, the council decided that we needed one responsible spokesman, because some things had to be decided immediately. And they elected me to be that person.

PAIK: You weren't scared? Because you could have been assassinated by the KGB.

LANDSBERGIS: No. A campaign of hatred was immediately initiated against me and the movement, and the agents of KGB were planted amongst us, but I was quite calm about it. Because, if they would have decided to kill me,

nothing would have prevented them from doing that. The body guards were needed only as a protection from common crazies.

PAIK: So the things started building up. Your name began appearing here in 1988, if I remember right, and it climaxed during the Desert Storm, when Gorbachev thought he could crush you unnoticed. The only way to bring America's memory to what you did for them would be to print a picture of you speaking from the tanks. At that time, there were already many correspondents stationed in Vilnius -- The New York Times, Washington Post, The Financial Times -- there was a lot of press.

LANDSBERGIS: But we thought that the collapse would take longer. I thought it would take several years. But it all collapsed in one year. We thought that it would be better for us if the collapse would take several years. We wanted only Lithuania be recognized as an independent country, and we wanted the rest of the republics to stay in the Union several years longer. It would have been much better for us... not to be in the same group. Now we are lumped together with other Soviet republics, as "former Soviet republics." But in truth we have been occupied countries! The way we saw it, the Soviet Union did not consist of 15 republics: it consisted of twelve republics and three occupied countries. I was

always trying to explain this to the West, but it was too difficult for them to understand that... Even today, they talk about us as "former Soviet republics."

PAIK: I hear Lithuania is doing very well...

LANDSBERGIS: Not very well... Sometimes it looks like we have been forgotten.

PAIK: Yes, that I have felt myself. I have been trying to persuade the press to write about your concert. A former President, and one who saved America trillions of dollars, and plays piano -- that would make a news, O.K.? That was my speculation. It didn't work out (laughs). That's what you were saying: you have been forgotten.

JONAS MEKAS: In some way, it may prove to be good, to be temporarily forgotten. It helps to invent your own ways of doing things. Still, eventually Lithuania will have to connect itself with the rest of the world.

Media, Seoul Olympics, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

PAIK: So, by 1988 you were sure you'll win.

LANDSBERGIS: Yes. It was only a question of time.

PAIK: But even then New York Times was against you. They wanted a slow transition, remember? And Bush didn't receive you for a long time.

MEKAS: How much you think was contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union by media? By the radio, TV satelites, the information that was coming into the Soviet Union from the air, something that was difficult to stop. That's

why I said yesterday, that when I heard ~~Dylan~~ Bob Dylan songs coming through the windows, in Vilnius, I knew the end was coming.

PAIK: We should add to the media the Olympic Games. Many people have told me about the importance of the role that the Seoul Olympic transmissions played in the breaking up of the Soviet Union. They were always told that the South Korea was very poor and military. But through the sport events coverage they saw that Korea was not so poor. And that played into the people's minds. That produced a very concrete effect.

LANDSBERGIS: Yes. We all saw it. It showed that a small country did defend its independence and did achieve so much, in comparison to the North Korea. It was a very clearly seen difference between the two systems.

~~LANDSBERGIS:~~ What happened in Seoul, also, it was the winning of the Lithuanian basketball team. But Lithuania was never mentioned by the Soviets... It was the Russian team!.. That didn't contribute to the dignity of Lithuanians who got the medal...

PAIK: The same happened in 1936, in Berlin, where a Korean Sohn could run only under the Japanese flag. So when a Korean won a medal, and a Korean newspaper sent a picture of the winner, with a Japanese flag,

the paper erased the flag from the picture and printed it... The paper was closed next day...

Intellectuals and Karl Marx

PAIK: Do you think we can save any part of Karl Marx theory? I don't think we should try to save it.

LANDSBERGIS: It is a strange situation when Western leaders, heads of States, politicians are talking 90% about economy, as if that would be the most important matter. Why?

PAIK: But Marx as an economist, failed... I remember, Adorno said, after Auschwitz nobody can talk about poetry. Now, after the Hungarian revolution, nobody should have talked about Karl Marx. It's my honest feeling. But in the Western universities, after the Hungarian revolution, a big wave of Karl Marx came up. That was really an irony. I think it was the American hegemony, you see, we can decide! We'll decide! They should have listened to what happened in Hungary, in Poland, at that time. After that the intellectuals should have never talked about Karl Marx, after 1956. Nothing can be saved. Of course, the American intellectuals today can not say that they are pro-communists. But they can say that they are anti-anti-communists...

MEKAS: I know people, right here in New York, and in Paris, very bright people, who say, yes, it all failed in the Soviet Union, but it proves nothing! They say, there is nothing wrong with Marxism or socialism or even communism:

only that it fell in the wrong country at a wrong time, and into the hands of wrong politicians, and it was all done in the wrong way...

PAIK: But it also failed in Sweden and England.

MEKAS: That doesn't reach their heads.

PAIK: Sweden and England are among the most educated people. And if it failed there, where could it succeed? It can't succeed in Uganda, or Kongo, or Madagaskar, Korea. One hundred years of experiment should prove, was enough...

MEKAS: No, they don't take that as a proof.

PAIK: That's amazing. We knew it -- Jonas and I we were two anti-communists in the avantgarde ...

LANDSBERGIS: But they did it effectively in Romania: they shot Coucescu and retained the system... It was an effective solution. Gorbachev was absolutely proud when he informed the Congress of People's Deputies, in Moscow, about it. I was there, when he informed about the events in Roumania, about the execution of Coucescu. He was his guy. Goodbye, Coucescu...

PAIK: Have you met Gorbachev?

LANDSBERGIS: On several occasions.

PAIK: And Bush?

LANDSBERGIS: Yes, four or five times.

I was asking President Bush to make some political

moves to protect Lithuania from the Soviet attack which was already prepared. He didn't believe it. He thought that ~~that~~ it would be disatrous for the Soviet policy, to do that. They won't do it, he said. But Gorbachev did it, in three weeks, in one month. I met President Bush again in May of 1991, after the hearings by the Commission on Human Rights, in the Congress, and again, in September, when I went to New York to participate in the United Nations General Assembly, as we were accepted as members.

PAIK: How do you feel, working in politics, as a piano player?

LANDSBERGIS: Sometimes I use my ability to play in various informal occasions. For example, during the reception given by the Iceland's Prime Minister, during a pleasant evening -- and there w as some Icelandic music -- someone asked me, and I played piano, old folk songs. I also remember, when President Mitterand visited Lithuania, he and his wife in my office in Vilnius, I played for them, it was my gift. I also played for the Danish and Swedish Royal Families... They asked me to play, because they saw piano in my office.

Fluxus and Liberation

PAIK: Pederevski and Landsbergis... You were a close childhood friend of George Maciunas, the Fluxus guy. He had an extraordinary sense of humor. But I also remember that your tactics against Soviet tanks had also a great

sense of humor. You had the defiance and laugh together. George used to say, that when he dies, he would like to return back as a frog. In the Asian tradition, a frog always has humor and it always has defiance...

LANDSBERGIS: I remember the situation, when I was pressed to give an answer to Gorbachev's ultimatum, in April of 1990. It was his second ultimatum. It was three days after the proclamation of Independence. He asked us to denounce the ~~Declaration~~ proclamation, and he sent a long list of accusations, treating us as breakers of the Soviet laws, demanding to implement it all in three days. And it was Friday, the ~~Big~~ Easter Friday, and we had a Press conference, and the journalists were asking me what my answer will be, and I said, it's a weekend, and it's Easter Friday, so we are going to celebrate Easter, and we'll decide it all later... let them wait three days.

PAIK: Humor gives you some distance... Sometimes it's the only way to survive.

I am used to do little things, I can not imagine how one feels when one is in charge of the whole country, or the world, you know.

BANDSBERGIS: Lithuanian business was always very small... And the question was always: should the policy be based on justice or on pragmatism. We chose justice. But that was uncomfortable for America. We have been troublemakers,

creating troubles for the good Mr.Gorbachev. Washington always called us mmm asking not to create problems because Gorbachev was doing his nice job...

PAIK: That sums up The New York Times, you know. When is the next election in Lithuania?

LANDSBERGIS: In two years. The Russians are pressing us now very strongly, that is, our government. Our government has already promissed to sign a ~~military~~ treaty for a military transit through Lithuania which would ~~mean inclusion of transit through Lithuania which~~ would mean inclusion of Lithuania into the Russian military sphere. It's not signed yet, but the President has said, that the treaty was prepared for signing. In addition, there are small bad news. Our Foreign Ministry signed an agreement with the Russian Foreign Ministry about regular consultations on foreign policy, to consult about the ~~issues~~ issues voted in the U.Nations, which way to vote, etc. So we are in danger of becoming again a satelite.

PAIK: It's very dangerous.

LANDSBERGIS: The more that we can not see any ~~necessity~~ necessity for that. It's curious, though, that when President Brazauskas visited recently U.Nations and spoke there, his speech was O.K. But after visiting the State Department, in Washington, he began speaking differently. For instance, now he says that we shouldn't rush to join NATO, we should not "provoke" Russians, that we should enter NATO one by

one, and not all at once. These are exactly the Russian arguments. The same words, the same argumentation...

PAIK: Is this because Russia is giving you oil?

LANDSBERGIS: Russia has been successful in blocking of building our own terminals which would enable us to get oil from the West. This has been done through KGB and some corrupt Lithuanian officials.

PAIK: But actually, it's the Americans who controll the oil flow. They could have helped. But the American policy is to devide the world and live in peace...

LANDSBERGIS: Now Kissinger is speaking reasonably, he is criticising Clinton's policy. As for Bush, in general, Bush was not so bad. He played his own game, an official game. But he really helped us to preserve our fragile independence. Of course, when we were endangered every day, we have been angry with him. It looked to us that it was so easy and such a small step for him to say just a little more...

ON CIURLIONI'S AND GEORGE MACIUNAS

PAIK: I live near Bonn. So I go often to Kunsthalle, which is run by Pontus Hulten. That's where I saw the paintings of Ciurlionis for the first time.

MEKAS: Hulten was the director of Moderna Museet, in Stockholm, when I met him first in New York, in 1959. I think it was in Alfred Leslie's place. Hulten liked Leslie's work very much. It's at that time that I gave to Pontus a book with reproductions of Ciurlionis work. He was impressed enough, by what he saw, to go later to Kaunas, Lithuania, to see his work in orginals, and later he included it in all major shows of the Twentieth Century art.

PAIK: They had a whole room of his work at Kunsthalle. And it was very interesting because there was a one musical score in which he made fun of musical score writing, like John Cage would do, you know, only that he did it fifty years earlier.

You know, I was a music critic for two years and I majored in Schoenberg, I spent three years on Schoenberg. So I know something about music professionally, and the two last pieces of Ciurlionis that you played at the Judson Memorial Church, I can say, that I can trade Schoenberg for Ciurlionis any time. Schoenberg was a very arrogant man, I don't think he would have recognized Ciurlionis,

he didn't even recognize Stravinsky or Bartok (laughs).

LANDSBERGIS: Same with Nina Kandisnky, who kept denying any influence of Ciurlionis on Kandinsky, even when it was very evident and witnessed by Kandinsky's friends, and Kandinsky's letters to Ciurlionis from Munich.

PAIK: I know that the Lithuanian language is still the closest language to Sanskrit. Which means, Lithuanians are very stubborn people who resist foreign influences... I know, that George Maciunas was sending you some materials and letters. You even wrote fluxus music pieces, in your letters to George. You also contributed pieces to Mieko Shiomi,

LANDSBERGIS: Yes, I sent him a few pieces. It was interesting for me to find out about the happenings and performances, so I suggested to him some events of my own. Later, I saw my name appear in Fluxus publications. I was a little bit surprised, and embarassed, not knowing how the communist powers will react to it all. But they ignored it.

PAIK: You saw George for the last time during the war, in the fourth grade, just before he left for Germany?

LANDSBERGIS: Yes. And I never met him again.

PAIK: And your father?

LANDSBERGIS: My father lived in Australia. He went

to Germany, in 1944, looking for my brother, who was 15 and was arrested by Germans with a group of underground fighters and taken to Germany. My father went to Germany in search of him and they both were liberated by the American Army and went to Australia -- same way, as Jonas came here.

MEKAS: I almost went to Australia, too. As a Displaced Person, I signed up to work on a ship that was crusing between Sidney and Le Havre. While me and my brother were waiting to be called on the ship, an invitation came from Chicago, to go there. So we said, why not, what's the difference, let's go to Chicago. But we never went to Chicago: the boat landed in New York, we looked at the skyline of New York and we said, "Ah, New York! Why go to Chicago?" And they were angry there in Chicago. They had an apartment there for us, and jobs, and there, in New York, we had nothing. But this was New York! You are in the center of your dream and you'll go to Chicago?

PAIK: But you didn't want to be a businessman.

MEKAS: But some people are telling me that I made a big mistake. They say, with my persistence, I should have gone to Wall Street...

PAIK: But if you are too stubborn, on Wall Street, you loose money. You have to be very flexible there... (laughs). (To Landsbergis): Did George live far from you?

LANDSBERGIS: I met him in the second grade. It was in 1939. He lived very near to my parents house. We played boy's games there. We were just two little boys. We were interested in electrical trains...

Later, we only corresponded. But we were spiritually connected. We lived in two different worlds, and ~~were~~ separately, for many years. But then we connected, somehow, once more. And all this time, separately, each our own way we were working on actualizing the idea of personal independence -- personal independence, as practiced by George, and national independence, which was my work. I see George and Fluxus as representing a very basic idea of independence, independence from the establishment -- to be a little bit in ~~it~~, but not completely in, to preserve the best. But in 1939 we were just two kids playing with little electrical trains...

PAIK: His father was a railroad engineer...

LANDSBERGIS: And my father was an architect.

MEKAS: George's father was a railroad engineer. A very good one. That's why the American Army immediately hired ~~him~~ him, after the war. All those wrecked railroads... He ~~worked~~ worked in Wiesbaden. That's why George went to Wiesbaden. That's why the first big Fluxus event took place in Wiesbaden. I spent a year there two, after the war, in a Displaced Persons camp.

PAIK: George's father was a professor.

MEKAS: Yes. He thought at the City College and published papers on railroad engineering in scientific journals. His mother worked as a secretary to Kerensky.

PAIK: Besides you, Fluxus had also an artist by the name Milan Knizak, he lived in Prague, he was aa very close friend of George. He was arrested by the communists 300 times. He is now a very high standing official in Czechoslovakia.

MEKAS: I was told, he is one of the presidential candidates there.

PAIK: George reconnected with you around 1965?

LANDSBERGIS: Yes. I wrote to him asking to send me some archival materials on Ciurlionis. But he, instead, sent me materials on Fluxus...

PAIK: But I think, from listening to Ciurlionis music yesterday, that he will become part of the classical repertory of music. Because pianists need new pieces, and these are wonderful piano pieces.

LANDSBERGIS: But sometimes I think that Ciurlionis' music is not for those who want to show themselves of, not for the brilliant technicians. And it's also contrapuntal, which probably is the reason that his works are not yet played by world renown pianists.

PAIK: And then, Americans do not play much piano... 25% of Julliard students are Koreans. The Japanese, Chinese,

Israelis and Canadians make up the rest... (laughs) America is going all pop... Susan Sontag did not mention yesterday, but most of the Pop music, American Pop music is actually Afro-American music. So that Americans do not need to have bad conscience pushing their culture to the Third World because that's where it came from. They are only packing it here...

MEKAS: Here is one anecdote about Susan. A few years ago I was in Japan, in the Kyushu area. And it was time to eat. So my Japanese friends said we should go to Susan Sontag's restaurant and have some noodles. I said, what? Susan Sontag restaurant? Yes, they said, a couple of years ago Susan Sontag came here and ate noodles and she thought she had never known what it means to eat noodles until she came and ate here. So they decided to rename the place "Where Susan Sontag Ate..." So, of course, I said, I want to go there. We went and the noodles were absolutely great. And right by the sea. Right at the spot where the Korean culture jumped into Japan.

ABOUT ART AND LIBERATION, CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND BOB DYLAN

LANDSBERGIS: The arts have very deep and strong roots. But at the same time, there is a constant change in the arts. And it should be noted, that the arts are most free of all the human actions. And among all the arts, the music is freest.

In the 17th Century, a musical textbook was published by the University of Vilnius. It was in Latin. Ars Praxis Musica. And the author wrote, in his introduction, as his first sentence: Musica ars inter liberalis nobilissima -- music is the noblest among all the free arts.

In various periods of our history the songs that were sung by the people have been our spiritual sustainers. And even under the Soviet occupation, when the armed resistence in Lithuania continued still for ten years, many songs were created about this struggle. These songs are the expressions of the desire to be free, expressions of the free soul. Sometimes I think: why do people want to die for liberty, what makes them like that? Is liberty something more than abstraction? How can it be described? The experiences of various people, who have been inprisoned by totalitarian regimes, tell that one sometimes feels more free in prison than outside of it. There was a cartoon, which sums up what

I am trying to say. It shows a man in prison. And a prison window. And a voice comes out from the prison, through that window: "I am free! I am free!" He felt more free in prison than those others, outside... And this is the point for me. The freedom fighters who died in the forrests during that decade, they knew that they were going to die. They left their homes to die. For a few weeks, some for a few months, they were free men. And they died free. And they died with dignity. Personal dignity, and dignity of their nation. So that when I think about what the arts mean for the liberation, I think about the dignity of spirit.

MEKAS: I remember, when I was in Lithuania, in 1977, actually it was in 1971, I was walking through Vilnius, and through the open window I could hear Bob Dylan. So I knew that the ice was breaking, that a new generation was coming, that the free arts were reaching them and you couldn't stop it. When I heard those songs coming through the window, I knew, I had a feeling that something must be happening. And, of course, it was happening. And, of course, it happened. But, we also know, that many artists sang the greatness of Stalin.

SUSAN SONTAG: Well, since I'm here with two Lithuanians, perhaps I should mention my own connection with Lithuania. My grandfather was born in the mid-1870s in a village ten

miles outside of Vilnius. But when he was two years old the family left for America, so I am a third-generation citizen of the United States -- a big country that is very different from Lithuania. I have a somewhat different idea than the one I've just heard expressed about the relationship of art and tribes, or art as the affirmation of a national struggle for liberation and dignity. Not that my views are based only on an American experience. I have spent about a third of the last eighteen months in a small country called Bosnia; I have been made a honorary citizen of Sarajevo; I am going back again next month. So I know from personal participation in various arts activities in Sarajevo something about the role that the arts may can play in giving victimized people some sense of their dignity. But, of course, you don't have to spend time in a small, martyred country to know that art is connected with human dignity.

But for all that -- and with due respect for the Lithuanian context and the presence of a man who is both a distinguished pianist and played an important part in the national struggle of his country -- I have to say that I am extremely unsympathetic to the connection of the arts with tribalism. Let me, in the

context of this discussion, give you the other point of view.

Though it may be that the most ancient function of the arts is to express the spirit or soul of a tribe or community, I am struck by the fact that nowhere is the notion of the arts as expressing the spirit and the soul of the tribe and the people more alive today than among the Serbians. We all know that art can be used in the service of the most loathsome regimes. But I'm not speaking of art which praises dictators -- films celebrating Hitler, odes to Stalin. I'm thinking of folk music, the genuine art of the people and the tribe. It can become the vehicle of the most terrible, racist, fascist sentiments. Folk arts are often mobilized precisely to affirm the claims of an invading tribe. You don't find this in Bosnia, seventy percent of whose territory was seized by Serbia when the present aggression began in April 1992. But you do find it in Serbia and among the Serbs fighting in Bosnia. And I don't think I'd be very happy to see more art celebrating the United States of America, and the soul of our many-faceted tribe.

I also beg to differ with Jonas Mekas -- not about his joy, but about the meaning of hearing Bob Dylan

coming out a window when he was visiting oppressed Lithuania twenty years ago. I'm sure you can hear Bob Dylan, or Kurt Cobain, or whatever is the latest emanation of American mass culture, in China today, or in Iran -- though perhaps behind doors, and not out a window. Let's not forget that this music we've loved is part of the American business machine: weapons and entertainment. The United States is the biggest arms exporter in the world, and It's the biggest exporter of mass entertainment. But the fact that this mass culture, of which Bob Dylan may be the high end, can be found in the living rooms and bedrooms and cellars of oppressed people all over the world, doesn't make them free. They can have their American mass culture -- the fun, the games, the clothes, the songs, the movies, the videos -- and still live under a dictatorship.

If we leave aside expressions of the soul and spirit of the truly oppressed tribe, or the tribe that pretends to be aggrieved or victimized, like the Serbs, there are some really important and valid connections between art and liberation that are not necessarily tribally indexed. First, art can play an oppositional role to many kinds of tyranny. President Landsbergis has invoked the notion of "inner freedom" -- you can be free in a prison, he said. Though I find that idea a little harder to assent

after spending time in Sarajevo, the biggest prison camp in the world, let's agree there is such a thing as inner freedom. Then I would say that art has a role in building or enlarging various senses of inner freedom, in opposition to various senses of tyranny. For if there are other senses of freedom than the usual, political sense, there are other senses of tyranny or oppression or totalitarianism than the kind exemplified by secret police and gulags and lagers, and the imperial takeovers of small countries. There is also the tyranny of inanity. There is also the tyranny of shallowness. There is also the tyranny of mindlessness. There is also the tyranny of a culture that makes people ashamed of being serious -- that severs the links between their consciousness and their lives, which makes seriousness possible. This suggests another oppositional role for culture, another way that the arts can defend human dignity.

Now I return to America and the culture this country sponsors and has made such a huge success -- the most successful system of arts in the history of the world. I think that system of culture and arts can also be the enemy. The art that I care about is an alternative activity, alternative to the main system of production, and is dedicated to maintaining the credibility and the

experience of the serious. For me this is the most valid connection between art and liberation.

MEKAS: Art and liberation is a complex subject. I think there are different layers, different dimensions in art activity. I think there is one art that is very deep, it's like blood of a country, of a group of people, that comes from very deep memories and sustains that little country or that group of people. And then there are arts that are more artificial and open to manipulation and are manipulated by politicians and are more temporary. I think when we speak about arts we should be aware of these different ~~layers~~ levels. And on some levels, art remains always art and you can not do anything to it or misuse it and it deals with whatever there is best in us. And the other parts or layers can be manipulated. And that, of course, happens. And back to Dylan: The liberation, again, is a very complicated thing. I mean, the breaking up of the Soviet Union did not happen just because of people desiring only the good things: the desires of some "bad things" were included in it also, for ~~im~~ example, their wanting, maybe, to have everything that the Americans have. The liberation process is a complicated process. There are good things and there are some very bad things connected with it. And the liberation that we ~~have~~ see taking place in the entire

Eastern Europe, and going to the Ural mountains and further, is not complete yet. O.K., the system has collapsed, the Soviet Union collapsed. But the liberation is continuing on other levels. It's not yet finished.

LANDSBERGIS: I would like to go back to the dignity in life and art, as an opposition to humiliation. We can see this humiliation in the arts too. Susan mentioned the commercial arts. Commercial art is a humiliation of the human soul. The uprisings in art are uprisings for liberation of soul's dignity. You have to defend your soul -- so you are uprising, to save arts against artificial arts, because always, in art in general, there are genuine things, essential things, and surfaces, fake things, fake arts. In a moral sense, art is expression of love. I can't imagine, it would be very hard to see art as an expression of hate. It could be a protest, a very painful protest -- but not that of hate, of somebody or something. Art always appeals to humanity.

SONTAG: I don't think there's anybody in this audience who doesn't realize that there are many senses of the term "art." But we can't use the term only for the art we like. As Duchamp taught us, put the bottle-rack or the pebble on the beach in the right context, in a museum, and it, too, is art. So art can be what we consider art -- an enterprise embodying a certain kind of

consciousness -- though what interests me is art that gives other models than the reigning models. That's the enterprise that Jonas Mekas has been conducting for decades: to give people in this city a larger idea of what film-making can be, to give them another canon, another repertory, so they won't be discussing whether Forrest Gump is a good movie or not. They won't give a damn about Forrest Gump. Instead, they'll go to the Anthology to see a movie by Bela Tarr. I mention the great Humgarian director Bela Tarr because his mmmm most recent movie, Satantango, is showing at the New York Film Festival, and I first discovered Bela Tarr at the Anthology, which showed one of his earlier films, Damnation.

But I don't believe, as President Landsbergis seems to think, that art is fundamentally connected with love, and cannot invite us to hate. Though I think the greatest thing human beings do as a species is to make art, I know that art is not necessarily a vehicle of positive or humanistic statements. Still, art is the best vehicle of transcendence we have, the one that has the greatest continuity, the longest and most complex history with which we can connect.

QUESTION: /from the audience/

SONTAG: The question was: Why I said that the American culture was the most successful in the history of the world. I meant success in the most literal sense. It's the culture which has reached the largest number of people ever. It's like acid rain. Wherever it goes, to any tribe, any outpost in the world, people respond by giving up their local, ancient traditions and turning on their television sets and putting tapes in their cassette decks. Go to Africa, to Asia, anywhere, places that are really remote. Ask them, "What do you like about these things, the TV, the movies, the music, and so on..." They'll answer in one form or another: "It's fun." America is where fun comes from. They'll say: "It's liberating!" /Remember, that's our high-minded topic today -- Art and Liberation./ But what they mean is: it's liberating them from their own cultures. There is an international culture. And I'm not speaking of the global village, don't buy that nonsense. There is an international mass culture, since the 1960s at least, which has unprecedented appeal to people everywhere. Never before has a culture been so exportable.

LANDSBERGIS: For me, the most impressive product of American culture is the New York City... It's impossible to export it, or import it, and it's for me of essential consideration in this small discussion.