Fragments from Under a Telescope
A Response to Albie Sachs

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One of the most harmful habits in contemporary thought is the analysis of the present as being, precisely, in history, a present of rupture, or of high point, or of completion or a returning dawn... I think we should have the modesty to say to ourselves that, on the one hand, the time we live in is not the unique or fundamental or irruptive point in history where everything is completed and begun again. We must also have the modesty to say, on the other hand, that even without this solemnity — the time we live in is very interesting.

Michel Foucault

Albie Sachs’ paper, ‘Preparing Ourselves for Freedom’\(^1\) has gained wide circulation and received a varied critical response. It is my aim to respond to key issues in the paper, and by so doing address other issues fuelled by the euphoria over a ‘dawn of freedom’, which arose from the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). The following are some of the key issues raised by Sachs’ paper:

“Mindful of censorial implications”, he suggests that the slogan, ‘Culture as a Weapon of Struggle’ be banned for at least five years.

That it is not enough to be politically correct by using more “fists, spears and guns” as this merely “leads to an impoverishment of art”. Attached to this point is the issue of “solidarity criticism”.

“We know where South Africa is, but we do not know what it is.”

Finally, he warns that the African National Congress should not create, in the field of culture, its own “State of Emergency”.

Albie Sachs’ paper has drawn a variety of responses from celebration through cautious acceptance to rejection. The cultural desk of the African National Congress/United Democratic Front rejected Sachs’ suggestion that the culture-as-weapon theory be banned. The desk reiterated the decisions of the 1984 Gaborone Arts Conference and the CASA\(^2\) in Amsterdam in 1987, that “one is first a part of the struggle and then a cultural worker”. The two conferences challenged cultural workers “to contribute to the decision and theory of culture that could help understand what a non-racial culture could be, and how to address apartheid”.

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2 Culture in Another South Africa.
In his response to Sachs’ paper Frank Meintjies, executive member of the Congress of South African Writers, takes a less critical view, accepting Sachs’ formulations with a few corrections. For example, he correctly points out that Albie Sachs is not the first person to raise these issues, that Njabulo Ndebele, Chris van Wyk, Nadine Gordimer and, perhaps before all these, Lewis Nkosi, have been saying it all along. But it is the timeliness of Sachs’ paper that gives it credence. Frank Meintjies sees South Africa as entering a phase “of rapid transition, of unstoppable movement to a democratic government”. “Now we need a new language”, argues Meintjies, “one imbued with the promotion of life, a celebration of democracy building on creative grassroots energy”.

There is euphoria in the air. We shall examine whether this is well founded.

Kendell Geers emphasises Sachs’ point that art “must remain critical of apartheid, but at the same time become critical of both itself as well as its history”. That is to say, it has to be avant garde. Gavin Younge, author of Art of the South African Townships, puts Sachs’ paper in the context of the 1987 Arusha Conference where the ANC resolved to consult with internal democratic structures of the people. He wonders why it took so long for Sachs to produce his paper.

Whereas many white writers are dismissive of the call by Black artists to go back to the ‘source’ for inspiration, Younge criticises this rejection. “Tradition”, he argues, “is the one quality that all revolutions have broken with. At the same time tradition is the one quality most necessary for an understanding of art’s affirmative social role.”

From the above, it is clear that Sachs’ paper has brought about a vigorous debate which we cannot go much into here. My aim is now to turn back to each of the points raised above to give my comment before turning to examine Sachs’ article in detail.

ALBIE SACHS AND CULTURE

Sachs is right in pointing out that a non-dialectical view of culture leads to the impoverishment of the struggle. However, his notion of culture is inadequate. For instance he states: “Culture is not something separate from the general struggle: an artifact that is brought in from time to time to mobilise people or else to prove that after all we are civilised.” Elsewhere he says: “Culture is not a picturesque collection of separate ethnic and political cultures lined up side by side or mixed in proportions, it has a real character and dynamism of its own.”

He continues in the same paragraph to say that when people sing the national anthem with their clenched fists upraised, it is an expression of an evolving and integrative interaction. He also states:

The fact is that the cultural is central to our identity as a movement: if culture were merely an instrument to be hauled onto the stage on ceremonial or fund-raising occasions, or to liven up a meeting, we would ourselves be empty of personality in the interval... Happily culture is us, and we are people, not things waiting to be put into motion from time to time.

I have a problem with this notion of culture. First, we are told what culture is not. Even within that, it is clear that there is a conflation of culture with its expression. We would be enriched if Sachs gave even a brief précis in what capacity he uses the word ‘culture’, precisely because the idea of culture is so vast.

In my engagement with Sachs’ notion of culture I will give my understanding...
of culture. A broad definition of culture will include all material and immaterial works of art and science, knowledge of manners, modes of behaviour and thought accumulated by a people both “through and by virtue of their struggle for freedom from the hold and domination of nature.” Within this broad definition, the struggle for liberation itself, its politics and theory, are all expressions of culture. Culture can be revealed, therefore, as both “an exclusive creation of the people and as a source of creation, as an instrument of socio-economic liberation and as one of domination”.

From the above definition culture is and always will be a weapon of struggle. Perhaps what is at issue is how it does this during the various stages of struggle. I use the word ‘struggle’ in its broadest sense here: as a process of adjusting, rearranging and engaging the forces that militate against a natural flow of life.

There is another, more specific way of viewing culture, in which it could be seen as a dialectical relation of domination and power, and of the expression of this relation. As Edward Said has noted, culture suggests “environment, process and hegemony in which individuals [in their private circumstances] and their works are embedded as well as overseen at the top by a superstructure and at the base by a whole series of methodological attitudes”. Environment in this instance also refers to the mental and psychological. Artists are part of this environment, processes and hegemonic relations and are constantly involved in the challenging and refinement of methodological attitudes towards culture, society and towards their own art (besides, art is one the highest expressions of given culture).

MORE FISTS, SPEARS AND GUNS

Sachs’ rejection of a mere presentation of “more fists, spears and guns” is an attempt to urge artists to go beyond the superficial to an in-depth search for a more precise way of expression, an articulation of fundamental conflicts and celebrations of being alive, and I must add, struggling. But once more, we are not given any concrete example of these “fists, spears and guns”. Surely it does not mean fists-spears-guns in whatever context are banal. Besides we also have to examine the broader context — political, social, psychological, geographical, historical — to see where these images emanate from. Is it a new phenomenon? Is it to move in vicious circles that must be broken into spirals of hope?

An absence of a revolutionary theory within the liberation movement resulted in the hegemony of a politics of reaction over cultural activities. The emphasis on armed struggle regimented artists to produce images of war, any ambiguous and contradictory images were discouraged, even seen as reactionary. To paint fists-spears-guns was seen as politically correct. The concept of political correctness had become part of those rhetorical tropes on which our revolutionary struggle depended.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS (PC)

In his paper Sachs writes: “Previously an artist was politically correct merely because s/he had selected the correct subject matter, namely fists, guns, spears or mouths screaming Amandla.” These cannot be expressions of political correctness. To be politically correct, in the proper sense of the expression, is to be clear on what the issues to be confronted are, how they are to be confronted. Any subject matter can be politically correct depending on how it is handled. For
example, take a tree. An artist can paint a tree in autumn at sunset. S/he can make it rotten at the core, under it a carpet of leaves blown by the wind or in flames, and call it *They thought it would never end.* Anyone living in South Africa will understand what it refers to without much difficulty. The reduction of political correctness to a mere choice of subject matter is a reflection of the absence of a revolutionary theory. The point is to move to another stage of struggle. We know what we do not want. We know what we have got sick of to date. What next?

Any observer of the art and culture scene in South Africa will realise that a new approach to art and culture has been imploding for a long time now. Our problem has always been to look at the liberation movement for all the answers to our problems, to a point where programmes that were initiated by people outside the liberation movement, or even within it from the lower echelons, were not taken seriously or were not noticed at all.

If art is one of the highest expressions of culture, we must examine our theory of art, our conception of it, and see how it fits, or does not, into the given definitions of culture.

Art serves social needs; it bears the imprints of society. It serves society also by virtue of its being ‘one of the many ways through which people explore and think about the world outside, appraise the changes they have brought about in it and potentialities as human beings.’

Taking art as a means of exploring and thinking about the world, to be given a prescription in a particular way, is to thwart creativity and reduce it to the status of illustration, hence fists-spears-guns. Art, like politics, must challenge and question its own conceptual tools. In Yenan, Mao Zedong offered advice that is worth recalling, even if it was not always put into practice by his own party:

> Works of Art, however progressive, are powerless if they lack artistic quality. Therefore we are equally opposed to works with wrong political approach and to the tendency towards so called ‘poster and slogan style’ which is correct only in political approach but lacks artistic power.

**WHAT IS SOUTH AFRICA?**

Albie Sachs comments in his paper: ‘‘We know where South Africa is, but do not yet know what it is. Ours is the privileged generation that will make that discovery, if the apertures in our eyes are wide enough.’’

Don’t we know what South Africa is? The problem with Sachs’ formulation is the usual South African discontinuous continuity or perhaps continuous discontinuity. Everyone of us thinks they are the beginning of resistance. From books our history begins with the arrival of white people. Speaking at CASA in Amsterdam in 1987, Nobel Prize Winner Nadine Gordimer said:

> Another basic statement to carry away from Vernon February, where he said, once for all: ‘‘Apartheid did not produce our poetry. Our poetry began when the Khoi-Khoi played on the flute to the first white to set foot in our country.’’

Here is a black man who chooses to suffer a historical amnesia, and here is a white who glorifies in it. Even when we deny or reject this formulation we begin by accepting it first.

I will argue that we know who we are, and what South Africa is. It is a society desperately struggling to pull itself out of nightmare turned lifemare, a society
plagued by organic crisis after crisis utilising conjectural devices to live from day to day, hand to mouth. We are reaping the fruits of apartheid, decades of fragmentation, fixing, positioning, framing, erosion of identities, creation of new ones. The apartheid gaze splinters. Apartheid, as the highest expression of imaging, warps and distorts visions, both of the perpetrator and of its victims. It creates relations of antagonism that are expressed through institutional devices of a political, social, economic, psychological and cultural nature. Through these institutions attitudes are formed, bolstered and nurtured.

These will be removed in our lifetime. In that sense our generation is privileged to witness and take part in this process. The next generation will wage or continue to wage a struggle against attitudes that will persist. It took Britain 142 years after the abolition of slavery to create the Race Relations Act of 1976 and yet, racism remains endemic.

Fanon is more realistic than Sachs. ‘‘Each generation’’, he wrote, ‘‘must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it.’’ The discovery of a mission requires a certain amount of knowledge of what has gone before and what is currently on offer. It recognises the necessity to criticise and challenge the status quo. Change requires a theory, as a guide to action. A revolutionary theory in turn offers a different attitude to the given reality.

Since our subject is art, it would be useful to look at its past in our country.

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**BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

**Art for immediate consumption and Art for contemplation**: Broadly speaking, art for immediate consumption is public. It is a mural, a poster, or banner that can be seen in the street. The object of contemplation is securely kept in the museum, quite often, or gallery, or private residence. The art of the cultural worker, whose dedication is to the struggle for liberation, is not meant for the art market, to be analysed, priced, and bought. Even then, to discuss issues of art, its form and content, its aesthetic and revolutionary expression outside the context for which it was created can only lead to an exercise in futility.

Art has a context. All art expresses something, therefore all art is political.

The paintings of the Natal artists Gerard Bhengu, S. Mnguni and J. Ntuli depict their environment as it underwent changes due to rapid industrialisation. Those landscapes had a history of struggles. The paintings of the Transvaal artists Sekoto, Mohl, and Mancoba, whose lives straddled the rural/urban divide, reflect this existence. The migrant labour system which is characterised by an interchange between urban and rural lives is captured by these Transvaal artists. It is through examining how each artist treats the subject matter that we can begin to glean the artist’s intent, latent or manifest, implicit or explicit. A single work by Louis Maqhubela is like a capsule of hope, technically supreme, theoretically apt.

**Polly Street and Township Art**: The artists who associated with this centre needed to identify with traditional African cultures, but unlike Sekoto and others, they had no personal connections with the rural base. They sought inspiration from the sculptural traditions of West and Central Africa as well as modernist Europe.

The bonding of traditionality and modernity has been a constant part of Black South African art; from Mohl to Stanley Motjuadi through to Mapule Sebidi. The Township Art Movement, whose animateur was Cecil Skotnes, concentrated, as its name implies, on depicting township scenes: drunkenness, family desertions, squalor. Even the strict depiction of a township scene would reveal hidden scenes
of the state. As Steve Sack has observed, Motjuadi’s Township scenes, for example, conveyed

images of an environment unknown to the white audience, and they therefore carried
an enormous responsibility in communicating the artistic... and quality of life in the
township".10

Notable artists from this group include Maqhubela whose work demonstrates a
personal search for a specific language to express inner longings, whilst addressing
social issues as well. In the light of all these, it could be argued that Albie Sachs’
view of art is rather bleak. He sees no redeeming features, which is quite surprising.

The Generation of the 1960/70s: Julian Motau, Cyprian Shilakoe, Dumile Feni,
Dikobe Martins, Suydneu Khumalo, Louis Maqhubela, to name a few, each addressed
their immediate environments with varying degrees of success. Khumalo’s sculptures are particularly engaging. His metal bulls fighting to the finish
both referred to tradition through ritual and to the contemporary scene and the
confrontation of cultures.

Lucas Sithole’s bronze bull, commissioned by a mining company, portrayed a
half-rising/half-falling animal, depending on the angle of vision. Whether these
readings were intended or not is beside the point. The point is in what they
conveyed, and the meaning they conveyed was decisive.

The point I am trying to make is, art in South Africa has been developing,
following its own rhythm, responding to, anticipating, and confronting socio-
political relations. The works of Louis Maqhubela, Gavin Jantjes and Durant Sihlali
can be seen as milestones in the development of Black African art in South Africa,
from the traditional through modernism to postmodern fragmentation,
appropriation and open-endedness. To a large extent the Black consciousness
philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) provided the inspiration
and theoretical framework for art in the Black community in the ’70s. Exponents
of the BCM offered a radical critique of art practice. They turned to tradition to
rediscover African history, and for them it was a source of pride and a foundation
for their onslaught on apartheid institutions.

It does seem to me that for Black people today, too, the message from Muntu
Myeza, one of the leaders of the BCM, remains relevant and clear:

We need the Black artists to inspire us and be able to put fire in our blood and ice
in our minds...Their words must be pools of sustenance from which Black people
can draw courage and strength...they must tell us of love... they must write songs
for our marches; poetry for our prayers, books for our history and our posterity. They
must tell us of love.11

For a people in struggle, such will remain the most logical responsibility of their
artists.

The Aesthetics of ‘Fists, Spears and Guns’: Protest or Resistance? Who is the
audience, the constituency for this art? If these fists-spears-guns are for the
masses/the people, then they are aimed at building their resistance. If they are
addressed to the system, it is protest. The difference is crucial. If Sachs says NO
to this art, where does he stand?

It is my fear that Sachs’ observation of art within the African National Congress
is conflated with South African Art broadly. During my recent ‘visit’ to South
Africa, my observation pointed to a more robust and revolutionary art from
committed artists, some of whom operated outside party politics, artists who are engaged in a search for liberation, artists who ceaselessly search for something beyond the obvious.

David Koloane's work, for instance, takes on an 'abstract-expressionist' style. It becomes a search for anonymity in an ocularcentric situation. The apartheid gaze never blinks — the identity card, omnipresent cameras, invaded privacy... In his work Koloane seeks to abstract in order to remain meaningful to himself; he extends the same safety to others. He argues that it is by abstracting one's identity that one retains it. Lucas Seage's conceptual works, for another example, adopt a very subversive stance on the context of South Africa.

THE APARTHEID DISCOURSE

The apartheid discourse is one of domination and power. At its most extreme, it specialises in a process of exclusion, by which the regime designates and isolates its opponents, and valorises its own exclusionary authority. Apartheid has developed its own special language to conceal, at least, in its own words, the brutality of its policies. Concentration camps are called Bantustans, labour reservations are townships, prison is protective custody.

Artists' response to apartheid is wide and varied depending on their levels of political development or degree of contact with the cutting edge of repression. Like Albie Sachs', my comments reflect a telescopic view. The telescope is an ingenious invention. It offers you proximity from a safe distance. Whereas those caught within the hub of repression see only what is in direct view, from a distance you can see a broader picture. The danger lies, therefore, in the possibility of someone looking at your eye from the other side of the telescope only to find a blind spot in the centre of your vision.

But even from a telescopic distance, I see within white South Africa also, an art that engages the forces of reaction directly, subtly, and with a self-critical eye. Colin Richards' article in Third Text gives a graphic picture of some of these artists. This reinforces the point that Albie Sachs' grasp of the dynamics of South African visual culture is perhaps far from accurate. However, his courage in raising these issues in a special paper rather than a casual remark merits commendation.

STATES OF EMERGENCY

For those of us compelled to lead lives of double vision, with one eye on a telescope and the other on the microscope, we bear witness to Sachs' fear. In the past, the ANC used solidarity contacts and anti-apartheid movements in Europe to create virtual states of emergency in order to exclude non-ANC artists and spokespeople from public platforms. This had nothing to do with the Cultural Boycott. It pertained to other exiled artists. It is this aspect of Sachs' paper that has become a centre of much discussion within Britain. Ironically, it was precisely these artificial States of Emergency that projected the resilience and courage of artists from South Africa.

The 1980s saw the birth of a Black forum, PITSO (Gathering of a Nation) in Britain, with a programme of conferences, symposia, and multi-media exhibitions. Membership was across party political lines. The underlying ethos was that there is no ANC, PAC, INKATHA, SACP poem or painting; a poem is a poem is a poem. Finish. Later a short-lived magazine, Pitso, was founded and collectively edited.
PITSO founded Black Artists for Azania, broadening participation to other Black artists from the Caribbean and Asia, for instance. This in turn developed into Inkaba which included artists from South America. In 1987 an exhibition organised by Inkaba involved forty artists. It was also a celebration of dance, poetry, music and story-telling.

It was at this time that the ANC began to create its States of Emergency. Non-ANC artists and poets could not perform in certain areas controlled by the ANC and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Music tours were cancelled in Germany and Holland. However, since the Albie Sachs debate these States of Emergency have disappeared and a healthier co-operation across party political lines is experienced.

**ON ART**

An artist, we are told, is someone who is especially sensitive to their environment, at both the physical and psychological levels. It is out of a need to make sense of the environment that s/he creates. The environment triggers inner qualities within that seek to order the surroundings. Since no one form is adequate to express this, the artist embarks on an endless search for a better way of stating her feelings and ideas about life as expressed in society and within the artist herself; her conflicts, joys, sorrows, doubts, within or without party settings.

In a conflict situation, where survival is placed on a high premium, political functionaries often do not tolerate any doubt or despair, however momentary. The artist within these settings begins to act as a propagandist, hoping always that time will come to create works of lasting merit. After all, the struggle is about creating conditions conducive to self-expression! Similarly, in other circumstances, artists create commercial works to raise money to subsidise their most meaningful art which is meant for contemplation, appreciation, education, training of sensibilities, and so on.

It is my belief that art is by its own nature subversive in the most general sense. Advertisers have learnt this lesson with lucrative consequences. Art about anything from a landscape to ‘fists, guns and spears’ bears a code that can be read in many ways according to one’s set of experiences.

Within the context of national liberation art can act as mobiliser, educator, recorder, and as ‘ideology’, but the problems an artist chooses to deal with have to be solved artistically. The artist in South Africa is conditioned socially and historically, and his/her ideological position plays a crucial role. Eventually, however, the good work of art outgrows the socio-historical peculiarities which gave it birth.

**THE 1980S AND 90S**

By the mid-1980s a mood of total defiance had begun in South Africa. The mass democratic movement was poised for a direct confrontation with the apartheid authorities. They had set themselves a goal to render the country ungovernable. Indeed by 1985, many government-sponsored local authorities decided to resign and groups of residents, parents and youths set out to clear the debris that lay piled up uncollected for months on end.

Where this debris once stood, public parks or peace parks were erected. Installations and site-specific works utilising found objects were set up by artists. In Mamelodi township, for instance, the *Cannon of Mamelodi* was made out of junk
car parts, an axle with wheels fitted with a huge phallic pipe trained on Pretoria, the administrative capital. Other sculptures consisted of painted tree stumps and tyres, old stoves and benches, worker’s boots, security hats, cattle horns and horses bones. The peace parks were collective works, the result of consultations and a constant fusion of egos. Unfortunately, this ingenuity and inventiveness ended up as another pile of debris in the hands of the South African Police Force.

Professional artists are also pushing their work deeper and deeper into abstraction, and here I can give examples of only a few artists: Charles Sokhaya Nkosi, for instance, famous for his woodcuts in the 1970s, has been moving from figurative work into less figurative collage and lately he painted over these collages as if to bury his old identity. Gavin Jantjes' work has evolved from realism to abstraction. His goes beyond the mere response to South African issues. Nhlanhla Ben Nsusha works as a sculptor, painter and graphic designer. His huge sculptures in metal are made with built-in cassette recorders blaring music. His paintings are a cross between the violent landscape of bogmires, marshes, skulls and maps handled in a sensitive and subtle fashion, deceptively simple. One of the most inventive and innovative of these artists is Lefifi Tladi. For years Lefifi has been developing a new alphabet for South African art from fragments of Ndebele mural art, native flora and fauna, and extracts from Vasarely’s work. Some of his most captivating works consist of letters to his friends, some of them five metres long, filled with text and brilliant black and white images.

Albie Sachs makes no reference to these innovative drives. To write about art in South Africa without referring to these widespread artistic expressions is hard to understand. However, though Sachs’ view of art is one-dimensional — and such views tend to impoverish art — admittedly the debate around these issues can only benefit art.