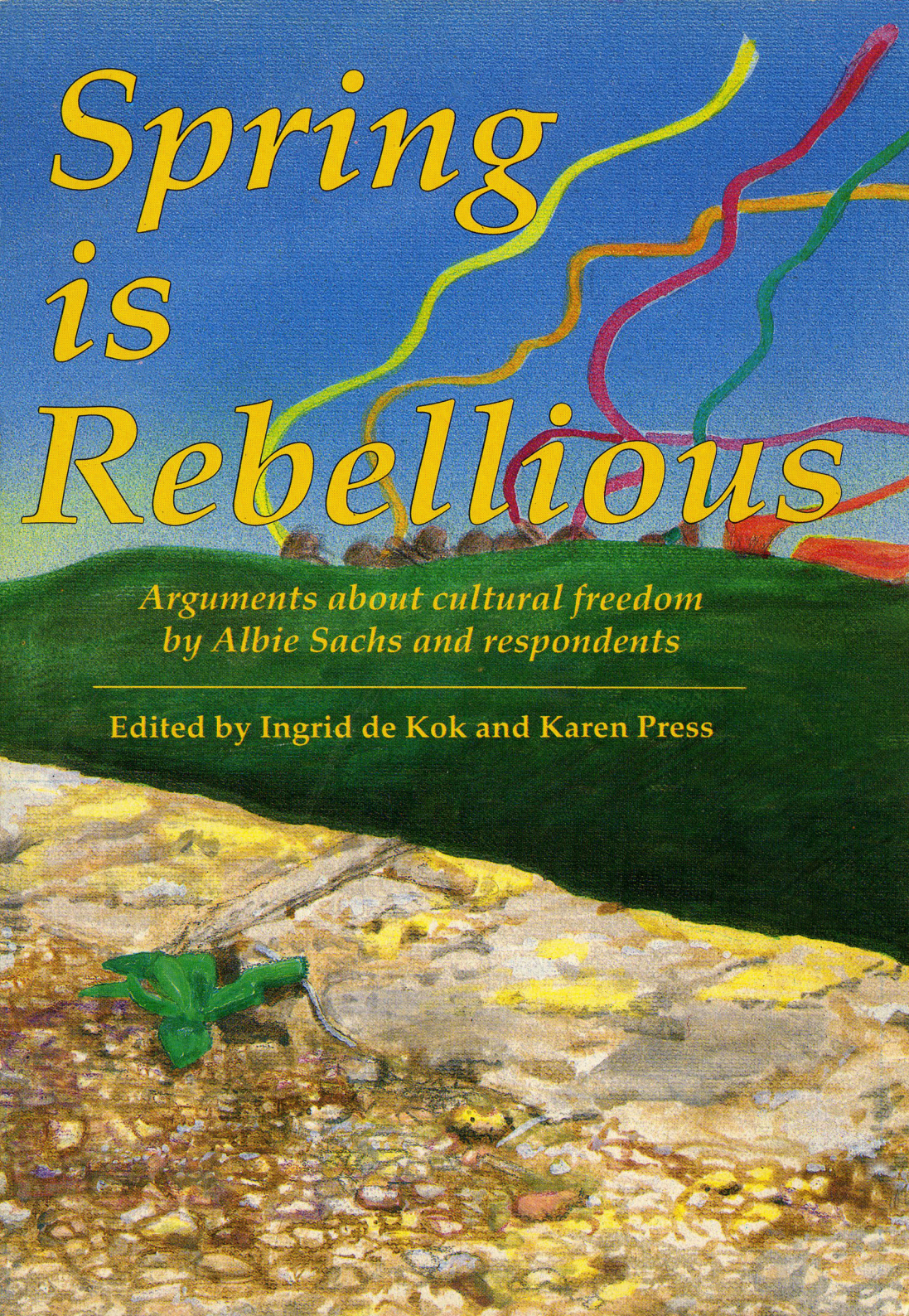
Spring is Rebellious

Arguments about cultural freedom by Albie Sachs and respondents

Edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press



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Life transcends all structures, and there are new rules of conduct for the soul. The seed sprouts anywhere; all ideas are exotic; we wait for enormous changes every day; we live through the mutation of human order avidly: spring is rebellious.

Pablo Neruda

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Introduction

Ingrid de Kok

When Albie Sachs' paper, "Preparing ourselves for freedom", reached South Africa via its publication in the *Weekly Mail* in February 1990, it received immediate, if controversial, acclaim. Written in 1989 for in-house ANC discussion abroad, within the country it stimulated an unprecedented level of discussion about South Africa's cultural imperatives, current progressive practice and the dangers of a too narrowly defined political expectation of and prescriptiveness about art. The responses drew a wide range of cultural workers, practitioners, teachers, theorists and members of cultural organisations into an extensive, self-critical and reflective debate. It was also a freer and more public airing of positions and differences than had been heard for decades.

This book reprints Sachs' original discussion document with twenty-two responses which emerged in the four months after its dissemination. While the book does not attempt a comprehensive account of differing views, as editors we have tried to draw as widely as possible from the sources known to us. Records of organisational meetings, letters to, and articles in, the press, talks at specially convened events, and academic contributions are included. Most of the pieces were prepared for public presentation in forums with their own histories and constituencies, and these situations of original presentation (Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) meetings, the Centre for African Studies seminar, etc.) determine the style of polemic; the papers have not been modified in the editing. In other words, it is as essential for the reader to contextualise

these interventions as it is to understand what occasioned Sachs' paper, and the original audience it was prepared for.

The pieces are loosely arranged, by occasion, region and form of presentation, and a rough chronology operates within these categories. Our aim was to produce the book as quickly as possible, as a contribution to informed debate, and as a source for those organisations and individuals engaged in a re-examination of their projects.

The speed has obvious disadvantages: we were, for instance, unable to locate in time for publication contributions by musicians, film-makers or the theatre community; nor are all regions of the country represented. The resulting compilation is dominated by writers, visual artists, critics and members of cultural organisations. Only a few of the arguments here claim academic status: academic papers are likely to take longer to surface.

Nonetheless, the interventions that are represented should give readers access to the level and character of interest generated. The COSAW reports are reminders that the debate is not the province of a self-appointed group of commentators, nor is it a leadership debate. Rather, from the floor, members contest, approve or modify positions to enter a discussion that is everybody's property.

The major theses expounded by Sachs are also the themes pursued by his interlocutors. His paper is organised around three central concerns. The first, and most controversial, constellates around the question of whether South Africans have "sufficient cultural imagination" to adequately depict the free South Africa beckoning on the horizon. In pursuit of this vision he suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that a banning order, or moratorium, be placed on the statement that "culture is a weapon of struggle". This ironic prescription is followed by an analysis of "solidarity criticism" and the instrumental and "narrow view" of culture; these impoverish artistic production as well as the struggle, restricting the capacity of artists to move forward to expression that would "expose contradictions, and reveal hidden tensions", and in so doing reflect "the emergent personality of our people". From this he arrives at the position that the cultural question is central to the ANC's identity (and, by extension, to the nation's wellbeing) and that the rich traditions

of the movement's members could produce a dynamic national culture. Further, he argues that while the Constitutional Guidelines have a bearing on culture (through the emphasis on national unity, respect for linguistic and cultural diversity and by the proposal for a Bill of Rights), the Guidelines should not formally be extended to culture. The third thesis rests on a crucial distinction between "leadership" and "control", in which non-hegemonic leadership and the acceptance of broad parameters rather than narrow ones, are advocated as the soundest and most democratic means of facilitating cultural transformation.

Three other of his statements are important to commentators: a recognition that artists have special characteristics and traditions; an injunction to "write better poems and make better films and compose better music"; and a brief final challenge to cultural workers (the first time he uses that nomenclature) to construct affirmative action programmes to enable those denied previous entry by the apartheid system, to claim access to the "cultural riches of our country and of the world".

The arguments that developed after Sachs' paper and which are represented here, though, are as much between commentators as with Sachs himself. Speakers refer to letters, reports, remarks made a few weeks earlier by other commentators. This interweaving suggests that Sachs' paper not only generated a debate that was on the threshold of expression anyway, but has promoted direct conversation between people within the broad cultural community who had hitherto had limited interchange. In that sense the paper has had a unifying effect even as polarities, hitherto subdued or parodied, become starker. In Meintjies' formulation, the paper has raised "the possibility of new alignments"; it has also broken the existing rhetorical stranglehold that had at best tolerated, at worst neutralised, the interventions of preceding critiques by Ndebele, Van Wyk, Gordimer and others. While some question the assumptions and the political project at work in Sachs' account, few would deny that his provocative paper is an important invitation to re-examine the terms which have dominated progressive cultural discourse over the last ten years.

In their responses, speakers from a variety of perspectives reflect on the nature of Sachs' authority as cultural spokesperson, and this concern intersects with uneasiness in some about the role of the returning exile. Dubow welcomes the intervention, considering the significance of "who makes the pronouncement" and "who is likely to listen". Morphet goes further to argue that "the energy of the responses derives less from the argument than from the location of the voice". It is undeniable that Sachs' "authoritative location" has given the debate legitimacy, but it is by no means an uncontested authorisation. Siers' critique is the most explicit here, compelling particular attention. He disputes Sachs' qualifications for understanding the issues on the ground as well as the applicability of his models of excellence, implicitly arguing that the cultural experience of exiles may disqualify them from the necessary understanding of cultural conditions in the country. From his perspective, Sachs' unmediated entry into the debate is potentially dangerous and can undo much work already achieved.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of this criticism. While there is respect for sufferings experienced and knowledge gained by exiles, in other of the contributions, too, there is suspicion of their possible agendas. It is to be expected that in the political fluidity of a transitional phase, competition for political capital should emerge more directly, and in the cultural sphere this plays itself out in and through existing organisational structures. This potentially divisive issue will no doubt be dealt with by the generation of returning comrades. For many, however, the introduction of new terms and new energy into moribund and often self-righteous debate is only possible through the timely contribution of trusted exiles.

The vexed question of control and leadership is, in any case, raised by Sachs himself. It is explored at length particularly by those based in organisations. Meintjies judges the paper a breakthrough because Sachs is a political leader, addressing himself to a political organisation. For COSAW in Natal the debate has a projected end point in "consensus" and "policy decision". Zondi focuses on the need for adjusting organisational policy and reads Sachs' paper as an invitation to broaden

strategy; Krut initiates a re-examination of what "progressive" organisation means. For Stent the issue is even starker: progressive cultural organisations "want culture on the agenda so that . . . cultural workers can sit on political forums and . . . give active input into the decisions about culture." They don't want to be "some kind of afterthought to slot neatly into political events." Starting from a different position, the Culture and Working Life Project charges that "it is creative people who should be deciding on their creative futures" and criticizes political leaders who require functional creativity on demand and the nature of their understanding of the relationship between cultural work and politics. For some, Sachs' arguments appear to support individual creative choices outside the organisational frames that have been developed to contain them; this apparent depoliticising of the realm of cultural practice is a source of anxiety, as well as (and sometimes at the same time as) being welcomed.

Flexible cultural principles of a state-in-the-making: this is how Sachs' comments on leadership and control are welcomed by Younge and Press, among others who view with suspicion the institutionalizing of cultural work. As Younge formulates it, "culture by decree" would ultimately harm the necessary autonomous relation of artists to their "tangled heritage". Press is critical of the prevailing tendency to posit intermediaries, channels of political approval, between artists and audience, and suggests that this reflects distrust of the freedom of artists and the rights of audiences to interact with them directly. The Interim Cultural Desk, widely, even if incorrectly, perceived as the cultural commissars of the mass democratic movement, begins its piece in agreement with Sachs' invocation of leadership instead of control. But it is unwilling to relinquish the language of the political, and firmly re-iterates the belief that it is productive and appropriate that culture be further developed as "a weapon in the struggle". The second half of this piece is a commentary on the cultural boycott, and the language of leadership ("we challenge") shifts to one of control ("we will counter").

To this reader at least, the debate becomes more subtle and interesting when it shifts from the arena of "quality control" to

the issue of standards. Sachs is implicitly admonished by Meintjies' statement that "sweeping value judgements of past progressive cultural work have become rhetorical and unhelpful", and Sitas states directly that "Sachs is simplistic" when he decries the presence of the oppressor in everything. But these and other commentators concede that creativity has indeed languished, and there are repeated references to dead-ends, impasses, stagnation and cultural laziness. It is here, apparently, where Sachs' critique smarts most. The Culture and Working Life Project's modulated response is suggestive. It concedes the negative effects of the lack of self-criticism (blaming this partly on political leadership and the alternative media that constructed and encouraged agit prop); but argues that Sachs' version of excellence poses not dissimilar problems: "The issue of 'quality' and 'standards' is political . . . it is a method through which people are excluded by those priests of culture who happen to control the church." The religious metaphor is extended by Press, who criticises the operative paradigm of "church art" in which the content (scripture), forms (sermons) and the way the audience and artist relate are determined by the priests and elders.

The cry for "standards" is echoed in different ways. Cooper declares that "sloppiness is not democratic, standards are not elitist"; Sitas and Meintjies in related ways call for internal criteria and judgements rather than generalized quality control. In particular Sitas argues for recognition of the formal innovations of oral modes, in a powerful redefinition of the achievements of the best recent work. Stent argues for the valency of "fist and flag" iconography. The Culture and Working Life Project surveys the evolution of "the revolutionary style" but directs itself ultimately to reflection on the fundamental question "will these times we are living through be *remembered* through our work? Or will our creative products be surface statements?" Others, too, are eager to positively evaluate aspects of recent progressive cultural achievement. But a COSAW Transvaal comment from the floor rings a more self-critical theme: "We all want to be little Mzwakhes" and "our work sounds all the same". For Cooper and Press, better art requires better politics. Those artists who want to deal with political

themes have to really work, says Press, to understand the struggle, to produce a political analysis and their own aesthetic vocabulary for expressing it. Rhetorical gestures will not do.

Another crucial theme, gestured to by Sachs only at the end of his paper, is the need to correct the inequities in access to cultural expression. Stent, Press, Meintjies and Sitas among many others assert the need for training, resources and support to help generate variety in expression. Material conditions for creative development need to be in place. Here Sitas indicates why the shift of focus from creative to cultural work has been necessary: "Unless conditions for creativity are transformed there is no way aesthetic freedom can be entertained." In Junaid Ahmed's account, "no amount of criticism leveled at cultural workers, liberals, academics, journalists and others will change weaknesses in progressive culture - education, exposure and exchange, and the eradication of apartheid will do so."

If it sometimes appears that Sachs' intervention represents a radically new view of artistic possibilities, other perceptions place it in a narrower historical perspective. Gerrit Olivier makes the salutary observation that, while a very important one, "Sachs is nie 'n nuwe evangelie nie". A number of contributors link Sachs' position with Ndebele's (Morphet's is the most substantiated here); Ampie Coetzee traces similarities between Sachs and N P van Wyk Louw's views of culture; O'Grady connects Sachs' call for pride in cultural roots with Senghor, and makes a plea for channels of communication with Africa with its similar experience of cultural transformation. In Younge's view, the disruption of tradition is essential for an artist, while at the same time respect for tradition is an essential element for art's affirmative social role. In his view, Sachs leaves space for artists to disrupt existing traditions and reconstruct genealogies. Kendell Geers, too, reads Sachs as offering a space for avant garde art, in which it can "remain critical of apartheid but at the same time become critical of itself as well as its own history", while Morphet would dispute this reading. In his closely argued analysis he sees Sachs' return to the notion of "imagination" as a conservative rekindling based on appropriations from two preceding "settlements". Sachs' thesis thus may be influential in the short term, but it is out of touch with

the cultural theories, models, and in particular post-structuralist thinking which would offer "a more durable base" for cultural reconsiderations.

In a time of political negotiation and realignment, theoretical arguments about cultural practice, and artistic works themselves, can play a significant role in re-connecting, unifying and focussing political energy. (They can, of course, also expose or suppress uncomfortable counter truths or forces.) Meintjies recognizes that the cultural community is subject to this pressure when he remarks that cultural workers are being asked, as other sectors are: "How do we make the jump that is required to move forward decisively in the unfolding phase?"

At first almost everyone wanted to claim Sachs - the liberals, the revivalists, the practitioners who wanted to experiment with form, those bored with the cultural content of rallies and political events, those looking for cultural models in the outside world, the silenced and the emerging bureaucracy who sensed a powerful ally. In assimilation politics, where there is a place for everyone and everyone has a place, the impulse to draw a magic circle and pull power into the centre is very strong. The process of distancing from Sachs which has since taken place depends significantly (even though other factors are present) on the political positions of those engaged in the debate. Thus far though, the tendency, in Olivier's words, to appropriate or misuse Sachs has been limited: most have engaged directly in the debate.

And few have not been impressed by the injection of energy the Sachs paper produced, agreeing that the old false oppositions needed to be subjected to more rigorous analysis. These oppositions are characterized by Olivier thus:

> Teenoor die kultuuraktivis, die bleek esteet; teenoor die persoon wat kuns volledig by die stryd wil inskakel, die een wat daaraan 'n geheiligde posisie bó die konflik toeken; teenoor die een met sy hart op die regte plek, die hooghartige kritikus wat universele estetiese kriteria op 'n strydgedig afdwing.

Sachs demonstrates the unproductive nature of such name-calling, calling for a generosity of response amongst those with a real commitment to producing a new culture.

In the end, no matter how important theoretical and organisational debate is, it is the artists, writers, film makers, musicians, playwrights and actors who will have to make durable things of South Africa's past and future, with all its pressures of expectation, hope and fear. The scaffolding of cultural debate is essential, but artists will make the house stand or fall. And for those Umlazi participants in the Natal COSAW debate, and others like them, who had to cut discussion short to be home early "because barricades were already being set up in anticipation of a major attack", the house is by no means habitable yet.

Preparing ourselves for freedom

Albie Sachs

Paper prepared for an ANC in-house seminar on culture

We all know where South Africa is, but we 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. The problem is whether we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about.

For decades now we have possessed a political programme for the future - the Freedom Charter. More recently the National Executive of the ANC has issued a set of Constitutional Guidelines which has laid down a basic constitutional approach to a united South Africa with a free and equal citizenry. What we have to ask ourselves now is whether we have an artistic and cultural vision that corresponds to this current phase in which a new South African nation is emerging. Can we say that we have begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettoes of the apartheid imagination?

For the sake of livening the debate on these questions, this paper will make a number of controversial observations.

The first proposition I make, and I do so fully aware of the fact that we are totally against censorship and for free speech, is that our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I suggest a period of, say, five years.

Allow me, as someone who has for many years been arguing precisely that art should be seen as an instrument of struggle, to explain why suddenly this affirmation seems not only banal and devoid of real content, but actually wrong and potentially harmful.

In the first place, it results in an impoverishment of our art. Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct. The more fists and spears and guns, the better. The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out, and the only conflict permitted is that between the old and the new, as if there were only bad in the past and only good in the future. If we had the imagination of Sholokhov, and one of us wrote: And Quiet Flows the Tugela, the central figure would not be a member of UDF or Cosatu, but would be aligned to Inkatha, resisting change, yet feeling oppression, thrown this way and that by conflicting emotions, and through his or her struggles and torments and moments of joy, the reader would be thrust into the whole drama of the struggle for a new South Africa. Instead, whether in poetry or painting or on the stage, we line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other, occasionally permitting someone to pass from one column to the other, but never acknowledging that there is bad in the good, and, even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad; you can tell who the good ones are, because in addition to being handsome of appearance, they can all recite sections of the Freedom Charter or passages of Strategy and Tactics at the drop of a beret.

In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions - hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus.

And what about love? We have published so many anthologies and journals and occasional poems and stories, and the

number that deal with love do not make the fingers of a hand. Can it be that once we join the ANC we do not make love any more, that when the comrades go to bed they discuss the role of the white working class? Surely even those comrades whose tasks deny them the opportunity and direct possibilities of love, remember past love and dream of love to come. What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world? There is nothing that the apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly. ANC members are full of fun and romanticism and dreams, we enjoy and wonder at the beauties of nature and the marvels of human creation, yet if you look at most of our art and literature you would think we were living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid. It is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing. Listen in contrast to the music of Hugh Masekela, of Abdullah Ibrahim, of Jonas Gwanga, of Miriam Makeba, and you are in a universe of wit and grace and vitality and intimacy, there is invention and modulation of mood, ecstasy and sadness; this is a cop-free world in which the emergent personality of our people manifests itself. Pick up a book of poems, or look at a woodcut or painting, and the solemnity is overwhelming. No-one told Hugh or Abdullah to write their music in this or that way, to be progressive or committed, to introduce humour or gaiety or a strong beat so as to be optimistic. Their music conveys genuine confidence because it springs from inside the personality and experience of each of them, from popular tradition and the sounds of contemporary life; we respond to it because it tells us something lovely and vivacious about ourselves, not because the lyrics are about how to win a strike or blow up a petrol dump. It bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space. So it could be with our writers and painters, if only they could shake off the gravity of their anguish and break free from the solemn formulas of commitment that people (like myself) have tried for so many years to

impose upon them. Dumile, perhaps the greatest of our visual artists, was once asked why he did not draw scenes like one that was taking place in front of him: a crocodile of men being marched under arrest for not having their passes in order. At that moment a hearse drove slowly past and the men stood still and raised their hats. "That's what I want to draw," he said.

Yet damaging as a purely instrumental and non-dialectical view of culture is to artistic creation, far more serious is the way such a narrow view impoverishes the struggle itself. Culture is not something separate from the general struggle, an artifact that is brought in from time to time to mobilise the people or else to prove to the world that after all we are civilised. Culture is us, it is who we are, how we see ourselves and the vision we have of the world. In the course of participating in the culture of liberation, we constantly re-make ourselves. It is not just a question of the discipline and interaction between members that any organisation has; our movement has developed a style of its own, a way of doing things and of expressing itself, a specific ANC personality. And what a rich mix it is ... African tradition, church tradition, Ghandian tradition, revolutionary socialist tradition, liberal tradition, all the languages and ways and styles of all the many communities in our country; we have black consciousness, and elements of red consciousness (some would say pink consciousness these days), even green consciousness (long before the Greens existed, we had green in our flag, representing the land). Now, with the dispersal of our members throughout the world, we also bring in aspects of the cultures of all humanity, our comrades speak Swahili and Arabic and Spanish and Portuguese and Russian and Swedish and French and German and Chinese, not because of Bantu Education, but through ANC Education, we are even learning Japanese. Our culture, the ANC culture, is not a picturesque collection of separate ethnic and political cultures lined up side by side, or mixed in certain proportions, it has a real character and dynamic of its own. When we sing our anthem, a religious invocation, with our clenched fists upraised, it is not a question of fifty-fifty, but an expression of an evolving and integrative interaction, an affirmation that we sing when we struggle and we struggle when we sing. This must be one of the greatest

cultural achievements of the ANC, that it has made South Africans of the most diverse origins feel comfortable in its ranks. To say this is not to deny that cultural tensions and dilemmas automatically cease once one joins the organisation: on the contrary, we bring in with us all our complexes and ways of seeing the world, our jealousies and preconceptions. What matters, however, is that we have created a context of struggle, of goals and comradeship within which these tensions can be dealt with. One can recall debates over such diverse questions as to whether non-Africans should be allowed on to the NEC, whether corporal punishment should be applied at SOMAFCO, or whether married women should do high kicks on the stage. Indeed, the whole issue of women's liberation, for so long treated in an abstract way, is finally forcing itself on to the agenda of action and thought, a profound question of cultural transformation. The fact is that the cultural question is central to our identity as a movement: if culture were merely an instrument to be hauled on to 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, this is not the case - culture is us, and we are people, not things waiting to be put into motion from time to time.

This brings me to my second challenging proposition, namely, that the Constitutional Guidelines should not be applied to the sphere of culture. What?! you may declare, a member of the Department of Legal and Constitutional Affairs saying that the Guidelines should not be applied to culture. Precisely. It should be the other way round. Culture must make its input to the Guidelines. The whole point of the massive consultations that are taking place around the Guidelines is that the membership, the people at large, should engage in constructive and concrete debate about the foundations of government in a post-apartheid South Africa. The Guidelines are more than a work-in-progress document, they set out well-deliberated views of the NEC as enriched by an in-house seminar, but they are not presented as a final, cut-and-dried product, certainly not as a blueprint to be learnt off by heart and defended to the last mis-print. Thus, the reasoning should not be: the Guidelines lay down the following for culture, therefore we must line up

behind the guidelines and become a transmission belt for their implementation. On the contrary, what we need to do is to analyse the Guidelines, see what implications they have for culture, and then say whether we agree and make whatever suggestions we have for their improvement. In part, we can say that the method is the message; the open debate the NEC wants on the Guidelines corresponds to the open society the guidelines speak about. Apartheid has closed our society, stifled its voice, prevented the people from speaking, and it is the historic mission of our organisation to be the harbingers of freedom of conscience, debate and opinion.

In my view there are three aspects of the Guidelines that bear directly on the sphere of culture.

The first is the emphasis put on building national unity and encouraging the development of a common patriotism, while fully recognising the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country. Once the question of basic political rights is resolved in a democratic way, the cultural and linguistic rights of our diverse communities can be attended to on their merits. In other words, language, religion and so-called ways of life cease to be confused with race and sever their bondage to apartheid, becoming part of the positive cultural values of the society.

It is important to distinguish between unity and uniformity. We are strongly for national unity, for seeing our country as a whole, not just in its geographic extension but in its human extension. We want full equal rights for every South African, without reference to race, language, ethnic origin or creed. We believe in a single South Africa with a single set of governmental institutions, and we work towards a common loyalty and patriotism. Yet this is not to call for a homogenised South Africa made up of identikit citizens. South Africa is now said to be a bilingual country: we envisage it as a multi-lingual country. It will be multi-faith and multi-cultural as well. The objective is not to create a model culture into which everyone has to assimilate, but to acknowledge and take pride in the cultural variety of our people. In the past, attempts were made to force everyone into the mould of the English gentleman, projected as the epitome of civilisation, so that it was even an honour to be oppressed by the English. Apartheid philosophy, on the other

hand, denied any common humanity, and insisted that people be compartmentalised into groups forcibly kept apart. In rejecting apartheid, we do not envisage a return to a modified form of the British Imperialist notion, we do not plan to build a non-racial yuppie-dom which people may enter only by shedding and suppressing the cultural heritage of their specific community. We will have Zulu South Africans, and Afrikaner South Africans and Indian South Africans and Jewish South Africans and Venda South Africans and Cape Moslem South Africans (I do not refer to the question of terminology - basically people will determine this for themselves). Each cultural tributary contributes towards and increases the majesty of the river of South African-ness. While each one of us has a particularly intimate relationship with one or other cultural matrix, this does not mean that we are locked into a series of cultural 'own affairs' ghettoes. On the contrary, the grandchildren of white immigrants can join in the toyi toyi - even if slightly out of step - or recite the poems of Wally Serote, just as the grandchildren of Dinizulu can read with pride the writings of Olive Schreiner. The dance, the cuisine, the poetry, the dress, the songs and riddles and folk-tales, belong to each group, but also belong to all of us. I remember the pride I felt as a South African when some years ago I saw the production known as the Zulu Macbeth bring the house down in the World Theatre season in London, the intensely theatrical wedding and funeral dances of our people, performed by cooks and messengers and chauffeurs conquering the critics and audiences in what was then possibly the most elite theatre in the world. This was Zulu culture, but it was also our culture, my culture.

Each culture has its strengths, but there is no culture that is worth more than any other. We cannot say that because there are more Xhosa speakers than Tsonga, their culture is better, or because those who hold power today are Afrikaans-speakers, Afrikaans is better or worse than any other language.

Every culture has its positive and negative aspects. Sometimes the same cultural past is used in diametrically opposite ways, as we can see with the manner in which the traditions of Shaka and Ceteswayo are used on the one hand to inspire people to fight selflessly for an all-embracing liberation of our

country, and on the other to cultivate a sanguinary tribal chauvinism. Sometimes cultural practices that were appropriate to certain forms of social organisation become a barrier to change when the society itself has become transformed - we can think of forms of family organisation, for example, that corresponded to the social and economic modes of pre-conquest societies that are out of keeping with the demands of contemporary life. African society, like all societies, develops and has the right to transform itself. What has been lacking since colonial domination began, is the right of the people themselves to determine how they wish to live.

If we look at Afrikaans culture, the paradoxes are even stronger. At one level it was the popular creole language of the Western Cape, referred to in a derogatory way as kitchen Dutch, spoken by slaves and indigenous peoples who taught it to their masters and mistresses. Later it was the language of resistance to British imperialism; the best MK story to appear in South Africa to date was written (in English) by a Boer - *On Commando*, by Denys Reitz, a beautiful account of his three years as a guerilla involved in actions of armed propaganda against the British occupying army. Afrikaans literature evolved around suffering and patriotism. Many of the early books, written to find a space in nature to make up for lack of social space, have since become classics of world ecological literature. At another level, the language has been hijacked by proponents of racial domination to support systems of white supremacy, and as such been projected as the language of the baas. In principle, there is no reason at all why Afrikaans should not once more become the language of liberty, but this time liberty for all, not just liberty for a few coupled with the right to oppress the majority.

At this point I would like to make a statement that I am sure will jolt the reader or listener: white is beautiful. In case anyone feels that the bomb has affected my head, I will repeat the affirmation, surely the first time it has been made at an ANC conference: white is beautiful. Allow me to explain. I first heard this formulation from a Mozambican poet and former guerilla, whose grandmother was African and grandfather Portuguese. Asked to explain Frelimo's view on the slogan: Black is beauti-

ful, he replied - Black is beautiful, Brown is beautiful, White is beautiful. I think that affirmation is beautiful. One may add that when white started saying black was ugly it made itself ugly. Shorn of its arrogance, the cultural input from the white communities can be rich and valuable. This is not to say that we need a WCM in South Africa - in the context of colonial domination, white consciousness means oppression, whereas black consciousness means resistance to oppression. But it does establish the basis on which whites participate in the struggle to eradicate apartheid. Whites are not in the struggle to help the blacks win their rights, they (we) are fighting for their own rights, the rights to be free citizens of a free country, and to enjoy and take pride in the culture of the whole country. They are neither liberators of others, nor can their goal be to end up as a despised and despising protected minority. They seek to be ordinary citizens of an ordinary country, proud to be part of South Africa, proud to be part of Africa, proud to be part of the world. Only in certain monastic orders is self-flagellation the means to achieve liberation. For the rest of humankind, there is no successful struggle without a sense of pride and self-affirmation.

The second aspect of the Guidelines with major implications for culture is the proposal for a Bill of Rights that guarantees freedom of expression and what is sometimes referred to as political pluralism. South Africa today is characterised by States of Emergency, banning orders, censorship and massive State-organised disinformation. Subject only to restrictions on racist propaganda and on ethnic exclusiveness such as are to be found in the laws of most countries in the world, the people in the South Africa envisaged by the Guidelines will be free to set up such organisations as they please, to vote for whom they please, and to say what they want.

This highlights a distinction that sometimes gets forgotten, namely the difference between leadership and control. We are for ANC leadership; our organisation's central position in South Africa has been hard won and the dream of the founders of the organisation is slowly being realised. Without doubt, the ANC will continue to be the principal architect of national unity after the foundations of apartheid have been destroyed and the foundations of democracy laid. Yet this does not mean that the

ANC is the only voice in the anti-apartheid struggle, or that it will be the only voice in post-apartheid South Africa.

We want to give leadership to the people, not exercise control over them. This has significant implications for our cultural work not just in the future, but now. We think we are the best (and we are), that is why we are in the ANC. We work hard to persuade the people of our country that we are the best (and we are succeeding). But this does not require us to force our views down the throats of others. On the contrary, we exercise true leadership by being non-hegemonic, by selflessly trying to create the widest unity of the oppressed and to encourage all forces for change, by showing the people that we are fighting not to impose a view upon them but to give them the right to choose the kind of society they want and the kind of government they want. We are not afraid of the ballot box, of open debate, of opposition. One fine day we will even have our Ian Smith equivalents protesting and grumbling about every change being made and looking back with nostalgia to the good old days of apartheid, but we will take them on at the hustings. In conditions of freedom, we have no doubt who will win, and if we should forfeit the trust of the people, then we deserve to lose.

All this has obvious implications for the way in which we conduct ourselves in the sphere of culture. We should lead by example, by the manifest correctness of our policies, and not rely on our prestige or numbers to push our positions through. We need to accept broad parameters rather than narrow ones: the criterion being pro- or anti-apartheid. In my opinion, we should be big enough to encompass the view that the anti-apartheid forces and individuals come in every shape and size, especially if they belong to the artistic community. This is not to give a special status to artists, but to recognise that they have certain special characteristics and traditions. Certainly, it ill behoves us to set ourselves up as the new censors of art and literature, or to impose our own internal states of emergency in areas where we are well organised. Rather, let us write better poems and make better films and compose better music, and let us get the voluntary adherence of the people to our banner ("it is not enough that our cause be pure and just; justice and

purity must exist inside ourselves" - war poem from Mozambique).

Finally, the Guidelines couple the guarantees of individual rights with the necessity to embark upon programmes of affirmative action. This too has clear implications for the sphere of culture. The South Africa in which individuals and groups can operate freely, will be a South Africa in the process of transformation. A constitutional duty will be imposed upon the state, local authorities and public and private institutions to take active steps to remove the massive inequalities created by centuries of colonial and racist domination. This gives concrete meaning to the statement that the doors of learning and culture shall be opened. We can envisage massive programmes of adult education and literacy, and extensive use of the media to facilitate access by all to the cultural riches of our country and of the world. The challenge to our cultural workers is obvious.

Albie Sachs and the art of protest

Frank Meintjies

First published in the Weekly Mail, *2nd March 1990*

Albie Sachs' paper "Preparing ourselves for freedom", an excerpt of which was printed in the *Weekly Mail* on February 2, comes as South Africa enters a phase of rapid transition, of unstoppable movement to democratic government. New power relations, an end to racially- and undemocratically-designed political structures, more equitable systems for allocation of resources and an end to the culture of conflict and violence are all in sight.

Culture organisations, as well as other community groups, education and resource groups and service organisations will all have to re-examine their roles critically in the light of the swiftly-changing context.

For a long while we have spoken of a culture of resistance (in the same way we used terms such as "alternative", "oppositional" or "anti"). The priority was to rouse and embolden the oppressed. Now we need a new language, one imbued with the promotion of life, a celebration of democracy building on creative grassroots energy.

Cultural workers need to extend the debate brought sharply into focus by Sachs' paper.

In his paper, Sachs debunks the idea that progressive culture is by definition direct, propagandistic and confined to reflex responses to oppression - but warns political organisations will be practising regimentation, Stalinism and the suppression of cultural democracy if they issue rigid instructions to artists.

This does not mean that Sachs believes that art can absolve itself from facing the ugly social realities of South Africa today. We must remember that Sachs' paper was presented at an African National Congress seminar, comprised of people who shared a common political ethos; no doubt it would have been superfluous for Sachs to spell out the inevitable political role of art.

It is anyone's guess what Sachs would say to a completely converse group, one which denied that cultural activity, in transmitting ideas and values, plays a political role. What would he emphasise to artists who see art as a pursuit of private reflection with little place for the community-linked oral poet or protest theatre? Or to the literary critic whose university education has denied him/her an appreciation of the umbilical cord that links the artist to the community in Africa and Latin America? Would the message be different?

Any critical assessment of an artist, white or black, liberal or radical, does not end with the aesthetic; it necessarily takes account of the specific milieu and how the artist engages with, relates to, is influenced by social circumstances and the issues of the times.

Sachs seems to agree with this: calling for broader parameters, he says, "the criterion must be pro- or anti-apartheid". As co-architect of the ANC's Constitutional Guidelines, he acknowledges that free speech is always circumscribed by other democratic interests in the community. Thus the Guidelines place a sanction on the propagation of racism, anti-Semitism, and fascism.

It is impossible simply to throw overboard the age-old debate between those who accept the artist's social responsibility and those who opt for a narrower, more Eurocentric conception of art. Many black artists become writers or artists because they seek to express political ideas.

The classrooms, the workplace, parliament, the broadcast media, daily newspapers and the courts, with their direct or structural censorship, have no place for their aspirations. They are drawn to the cultural arena where they hope to create their own space for political articulation. The Emergency clamp-

down and vicious media gags have spurred artists to commandeer artistic space for voicing political ideals.

The direct approach in art, addressing topical political issues, cannot be summarily denounced as invalid. Bertolt Brecht, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Soviet poster-makers and numerous Third World poets have proved beyond question that such work has an important place in the spectrum of cultural expression.

However, Sachs is charging that South Africa has had too much of a good thing - which is doing more harm than good if it is undercutting other forms of art that could be more liberating and revitalising.

There is too little focus on how the ordinary person in an everyday situation is fighting back with laughter and wit and relationships and a refusal to succumb to despair. In addition, clenched fists and militant rhetoric alone do not denote important cultural work.

The best exponents of political art are those who strive for mastery of their craft, who exercise utmost artistic discipline and diligence, and who study different forms and techniques. It is these ingredients which demarcate the difference between effective art and works which count as important historical and cultural records or tools for mobilisation.

Far too many young progressive artists are anxious to follow role models but shirk discipline and hard work.

Art is born through experience, through grappling with issues, through working over perceptions and thoughts and feelings.

Sloganeering soon becomes a barrier to depth and genuine expression. It stifles creativity and reflection, replacing it with a mechanical incantatory approach which severs the organic link between the work and the artist and the community he is trying to serve. And when the drum-beating drowns out the needs and interests and doubts of ordinary people, it becomes an obstacle to the building of a democratic ethos.

However, it would be wrong to condemn politically orientated work altogether. It would be a stultifying action, indulging in the same dictatorial prescriptiveness that Sachs labels "our own internal States of Emergency".

It is also an inadequate response merely to highlight the problem of poor quality and the dominance of overt political messages in art. Cultural organisations need to expose young artists to different forms of writing and painting and theatre, and to encourage greater attention to craft. Perhaps it is time to give space and recognition to the quieter, more reflective voices on our festival platforms, instead of only the more strident voices that usually come forward.

Sachs' paper has been hailed as a breakthrough. Perhaps what he says is unique because it is from the pen of a political leader, or because he addresses himself so frankly to political organisations. However, much of what he says echoes what several leading cultural workers have been advocating for some time.

Novelist Nadine Gordimer, Congress of South African Writers president Njabulo Ndebele and poet Chris van Wyk have all been crusading for an art that goes beyond the knee-jerk responses to the hurt caused by apartheid.

Ndebele has deplored the "overt political nature and journalistic reportage of some black South African fiction" as far back as 1984.

Van Wyk, reflecting on the "inadequacy" of post-1976 poetry, has lamented that political writing has been weakened where "writing was not sustained by a rich human and cultural dimension".

Even the performer/poet Mzwakhe Mbuli, the king of agit-prop, has denounced the tendency among younger poets - many of whom unsuccessfully try to emulate his artistry - of thinking it's as easy as knocking out a few "instant" lines for every political occasion.

Mi Hlatshwayo, cultural co-ordinator of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, has appealed for an "upgrading" of the cultural output of workers: "It needs to be of such a quality that it can challenge commercial cultural productions on merit, not on the basis that it's coming from progressive cultural organisations and thus has to be popular."

On the theatre front, many voices have called for a break with clichés and the hackneyed approach found in much protest drama. Last year actor/director John Kani complained that

imposters "jumping on the bandwagon" had lowered the quality of protest theatre: "No one wants to sit back and be told that we are black and we are suffering. We know that."

Ari Sitas, director of worker-culture programmes, has slammed theatre practitioners who produce work according to a set "formula", work that is lacking in depth and abounding in stereotypes, aimed more at overseas audiences than at the community at home.

The *New Nation*'s former arts editor, Tyrone August, has been one of the most consistent and outspoken voices in calling for new ideas in theatre. As far back as 1987 he told his politicised readership: "Stop the Revolution! I want to get off! That's what I feel like after seeing what passes for protest theatre at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown."

Although his newspaper was explicitly a voice of the oppressed, August ensured that the arts pages covered cultural events more broadly. Coverage included reviews from the Alhambra, Alexander, Andre Huguenot and Windybrow, even though few black people patronised these palaces of mainstream theatre.

This approach endorses the position that the construction of a new culture cannot take root without absorbing certain elements of the old.

Why did all these voices urging a new direction not coalesce into a beacon to mark the way forward for progressive artists?

Perhaps the time was not right - the state's mailed fist hung over the townships and thousands were experiencing detention. Perhaps it required members of the political leadership to give the cue.

Whichever way we look at it, now is the time to break with a culture in which, as Sachs puts it, "our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture"; in which "everything is obsessed with the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed".

Now is the time to take up Njabulo Ndebele's challenge (uttered by a character in *Fools and Other Stories*): ". . . every aspect of life, if creatively indulged in, is the weapon of life itself against the greatest tyranny."

Sachs' paper has generated excitement within the broad artists' community, raising the possibility of new alignments.

Cultural organisations should answer this perhaps by carving out a new profile, one that is more inclusive and more forward-looking, one that invites open debate and co-operation in broad ventures aimed at building "one nation one country".

Implementation of the cultural boycott - a vital strategy to isolate apartheid - has in the past put us at odds with many artists who, although not part of our organisations, were also not part of apartheid formations and structures.

These artists perceived us as "censors", while we disliked the idea of being used as a political rubber stamp for the cultural passports of artists who avoided contributing to our communities, our organisations and our activities.

With Sachs calling on culture organisations to work with "broader parameters rather than narrow ones", this entails greater scope for dialogue and engagement with such artists. I'm sure Sachs does not mean that critical debate should cease, but rather that we see all artists who reject apartheid as friends more than enemies, to encourage "all forces for change".

In this regard, we should be asserting our influence in the cultural sphere through "better poems, better films and better music", in the words of Sachs, and through stimulation, co-ordination and effective organisation which advances the rights of artists.

Open letter to Albie Sachs

Neville Dubow

First published in the Cape Times, *February 19th 1990*

I write this in response to extracts from your ANC in-house paper "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" published in the *Cape Times*. In particular I address myself to the first extract - on whether ANC members have the cultural imagination for the new South Africa.

I read your paper with pleasure and admiration. It is clear that the trauma caused by the bomb attack on you has strengthened you, and far from embittering has only added to your generosity of spirit. For this I salute you. I recall that when we were students we sometimes took opposing sides on issues such as the usages of art. I note with interest that you have changed your position. You now recognise that to see art only as an instrument of struggle is, in your words, "banal and devoid of real content" and further, "wrong and potentially harmful". It is important that you have recognised this and even more important that you have published your change of viewpoint so that it may become part of a wider debate. You make a distinction between art as a political weapon and what you call real instruments of struggle that admit no ambiguities (like a gun, for instance, that, were it full of contradictions, would fire in all directions). In fact, art - complex and powerful art - does precisely that. It does fire in all directions. The power of art as you concede is that it can deal in contradictions, in subtleties that deflate the bubble of conventional wisdom.

A generation of South African artists, writers mostly, have been able to do just that. They have exploited the contradictory nature of the apartheid state and have made art in spite of it. They have gone further. They have used it as the very raw material from which to make their art. The thrust of your argument is, in fact, not new. It has been argued by writers, by artists and educators, mostly those outside political organisations, who know that while the art work may appear simple, the process by which it is realised is hardly simplistic.

What is encouraging though is that *you* are saying it, from a position of influence within the ANC. In a curious way there are parallels with other pronouncements that have shaken the fabric of the apartheid state in recent weeks. What the State President has said, and what his senior ministers are attempting, in their newspeak, to interpret, is also not new. Voices in the democratic opposition have been saying it for years. What is important here is *who makes the pronouncement* and this, of course, is bound up with *who is likely to listen.* In your case I profoundly hope that what you are saying is heard and understood, not least by the Cultural Desk of your own organisation. It would interest you to hear, and perhaps sadden you too, that many young artists, democratically minded, have been able to withstand the pressures of the state in its hitherto relentless drive towards ideological conformity. But these same artists have considerably greater misgivings about the prescriptions and prohibitions that they perceive emanating from the Cultural Desk of the ANC. They sense that art regulated by edict will be crippled, whether the edict comes from the ideological right or left. And if we, in the new South Africa, have not learned the lessons of cultural Stalinism then we are doomed to repeat its crushing mistakes. I am greatly encouraged, therefore, by your principled stand. May I guess that your own experience as a creative writer has had some effect on your changed views? I was moved by your call for artists within your ranks to embrace "non-political" themes like those of joy or love, subjects other than those symbolised by a raised clenched fist. It was Bertolt Brecht, you will recall surely, who pointed out the tremendous problems for artists working in times of fierce political struggle

where only "protest art" seemed relevant. He was addressing posterity:

> Indeed I live in the dark ages!
> A guileless word is an absurdity.
> A smooth forehead betokens a hard heart.
> He who laughs has not yet heard the terrible
> tidings.
> Ah! What an age it is
> when to speak of trees is almost a crime
> for it is a kind of silence about injustice!

I would have thought that no one would accuse you of having a smooth forehead. And you have clearly shown your refusal to be silent about injustice. Yet I imagine there might well be those, within your ranks, who are disturbed by your paper.

Nevertheless, we must all, in our own way, continue to encourage artists in the new South Africa to realise that they have the right (if this is what they feel moved to do) to speak of trees, and love, and joy. Such an art need be neither uncritical nor escapist.

Any art that makes us realise our creative potential, reinforces our human dignity, strengthens our capacity to resist tyranny, is, in its profoundest sense, political. But it is for our artists to find the appropriate forms to express this; and it is for all of us to resist the attempts of politicians to dictate to us what these should be.

Yours in friendship,
Neville Dubow

Sachs, kultuur en die struggle

Ampie Coetzee

Artikel wat eers verskyn het in die Vrye Weekblad, *9 Maart 1990*

Afrikaanse kultuurkolomme het baie aandag gegee aan Albie Sachs van die ANC se stellings oor die rol van die kultuur in die struggle. Sy sienings is saamgevat, prominensie verleen en kommentaar oor gevra. En toonaangewende skrywers se onvoorwaardelike aanvaarding daarvan was duidelik: Chris Barnard: "Wat Sachs sê is die spyker op die kop"; Jan Rabie: "Sachs is op die regte pad"; Elize Botha: "Is dit nou nie verblydend nie?" (*Beeld*, 20 Februarie)

En André le Roux, skoorsoekerig soos gewoonlik, het uitgelok: "Maar 'n mens - veral die lesers van boeke - kan tereg van Afrikaanse skrywers verwag - veral die groepie wat onder die bome by Victoria Falls gestaan het - om te sê as hulle ander insigte gekry het, hetsy uit hul eie skryfwerk of drome, die vrylating van mnr Mandela, die opheffing van die verbod op die ANC, of die ruiterlike erkennings van professor Albie Sachs. Dat daar oor gepraat kan word." (*Die Burger*, 22 Februarie)

Noudat daar geleentheid was om Sachs se stuk in geheel te lees, kan die debat miskien binne die geledere van die Afrikanerskrywer en letterkundige verder gevoer word.

Een van die duidelik uitgespelde funksies van die stuk was "for the sake of livening debate on these questions". En hy praat van sy "controversial observations".

Terloops: die dokument wat ek te lese gekry het begin so: "ANC In-House Seminar on Culture. Paper by Albie Sachs. First Draft." Ons het dus geensins hier met ex cathedra ANC-

beleidsuitsprake te doen nie. En in sy benadering beklemtoon hy deurgaans dat dit nie oor beheer of oor hegemonie gaan nie: die leiding moet kom van diegene wat kultuur beleef: dus demokraties.

Dele van Sachs se stuk herinner 'n mens aan N P Van Wyk Louw se stukke in "Berigte te velde" - selfs sy titel "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom". In 1990 sê Sachs: "And what about love? We have published so many anthologies and journals and occasional poems and stories, and the number that deal with love do not make the fingers of a hand."

En in 1936 - nogal in Stellenbosch - sê Van Wyk Louw: "In ons letterkunde is die verhouding van man en vrou nog skaars aangeraak; ons besit g'n liefdesroman nie en baie min liefdesgedigte."

Verder: "What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms; including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world?" Van Wyk Louw: "Die temas van alle groot poësie - die mens teenoor die liefde, teenoor God - is ook die inhoud van hierdie Afrikaanse poësie, en niks geringer sal ons vorms vul nie. Ons wil as Afrikaners volledig mens wees en die ervaring in ons poësie uitdruk."

Daar is ook ander ooreenkomstes, maar dit sou mens op 'n meer akademiese verhoog kon uitspel. Dis hier van die uiterste belang dat ons nie ons historiese perspektief moet verloor nie. Waar het die Afrikaner gestaan in die laat dertigerjare, en waar staan die ANC aan die begin van die negentigerjare?

Die mobilisasie van die Afrikaner - kultureel, ekonomies en polities - wat begin het met die stigting van die Nasionale Party in 1914 (in Bloemfontein) was besig om af te stuur op die eenwording van 'n volksbeweging wat sou lei tot die magsoorname van 1948. Die mobilisasie van die onterfdes en die ontburgerdes wat begin met die stigting van die ANC in 1912 (in Bloemfontein) is nou besig om af te stuur op 'n nasionale eenwording en 'n demokraties verkose regering.

In albei bewegings het kultuur saam met die wapen en die ekonomie en die politiek 'n gelyke rol gespeel. Die Afrikaner se geval is bekend. En as Sachs sê in sy eerste proposisie, "that our members should be banned from saying that culture is a wea-

pon of struggle", en hy sê in sy tweede uitdagende stelling, t.o.v. die rol van kultuur met betrekking tot die Grondwetlike Riglyne, dat kultuur moet meeskryf aan die Riglyne, is hy dan nie besig om hom te weerspreek nie? Kultuur - skryf, skilder, musiek, dans - is deel van die stryd en is ook deel van die oorwinning deur die saamskryf daarvan in die dokument van demokrasie.

Die verandering in kultuur gaan gepaard met die verandering in die aard van die stryd: gedemokratiseerde kultuur is nie dieselfde as strydkultuur nie. Maar die een is, dialekties en binne sosiale en politieke konteks, nie noodwendig minder as die ander nie, en die een was nodig voor die ander.

Sachs kan die demokrasie vir Suid-Afrika oor die einder sien aankom, en hy voel dit sy taak as kunsliefhebber en skrywer om nou vir die MK-digter te sê dat hy spiese sal moet verruil vir troffels. Net soos Van Wyk Louw, wat die demokrasie vir sy volk sien kom het, toe begin bou het aan 'n nuwe Afrikaanse kultuur. Hy kon toe net dink in terme van sy volk, omdat die konsep nasionaal toe anders, kleiner, was as wat dit nou, danksy die ANC, geword het.

Sachs se stuk gaan duidelik oor die toekoms, oor wanneer kuns in hierdie land, soos die politiek en die ekonomie, gedemokratiseer geraak het. Dan het die kuns die ruimte om dubbelsinnig, meerduidig, intertekstueel, post-modernisties te wees, en "humanity in all its forms" uit te druk. Soos waar die moderne Afrikaanse letterkunde vandag staan: maar ongelukkig geskep binne die illusie van 'n middelklas Westerse demokrasie.

Omdat Sachs se sienings opgestel is vir 'n interne dokument waarin hy met sy kamerade praat, gebruik hy vanselfsprekend terminologie soos "culture is us" en "the cultural question is central to our identity as a movement". Maar die saak wat kultuurfilosowe van sowel die ANC as die Afrikaner sal moet begin aanspreek, is die kwessie van aparte kultuur identiteite binne een nasie.

Soos byvoorbeeld: hoe gaan die gesofistikeerde Afrikaanse letterkunde, geskryf binne sy eie vermeende demokrasie, aansluit by, deel word van, 'n letterkunde wat deel was van die

struggle, en in die toekoms ook gaan streef na wat Sachs daarvoor sien?

En die debat wat hier aangeroer word, gaan nie net oor kultuur nie; dit kring uit tot ander sfere van ons saambestaan in Suid-Afrika. Soos die onderwys: Verwoerd se erfenis van rioolonderwys teenoor elite wit-onderwys. En dan gaan dit ook oor die ekonomie, oor ongelyke geleenthede, opwaartse mobiliteit.

Uiteindelik is Albie Sachs se debat deel van die hele diskoers oor nasionalisering as demokratisering; en Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers en letterkundiges is 'n opdrag opgelê om 'n duidelike saak uit te maak vir 'n toekomstige grondwet oor wat die betekenis van, byvoorbeeld, 'n nasionale letterkunde is. Oor een letterkunde binne een land, geskryf vanuit verskeie perspektiewe en in die verskillende tale van Suid-Afrika.

Competition with history: resistance and the avant garde

Kendell Geers

First published in The Star Tonight, *21st March 1990*

Albie Sachs' paper "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", of which an extract was published in the *Weekly Mail* on 2 February, has become the focus of much debate. In it he called for a five year ban from saying "that culture is a weapon of the struggle".

This has been hailed by those artists whose work has always remained unaffected by the events of the country, as justification now for their positions. Frank Meintjies responded with an article in the *Weekly Mail* on the 2 March saying that Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, Chris van Wyk and Tyrone August, amongst others, had been saying it all along. Recently the Interim Cultural Desk all but rejected the paper, reasserting their original position that "one is first part of the struggle and then a cultural worker."

The focus of Sachs' paper was not to dismiss the fact that artists may be part of the struggle, but rather that art should now undermine apartheid through motivated criticism. He writes: "Instead of getting real criticism, we get solidarity criticism. Our artists are not pushed to improve the quality of their work, it is enough that it be politically correct."

Previously an artist was politically correct merely because s/he had selected the correct subject matter, namely fists, guns, spears or mouths screaming "Amandla". It soon became noth-

ing more than lip service. The alternative is now for art to remain critical of apartheid, but at the same time become critical of both itself as well as its own history. Historically, such art has been given the term avant garde.

In the eighties, the term suffered numerous attacks under Post Modernism, in the move away from the autonomy of the Modernist work of art. The concept of avant garde as "pioneers or innovators in any art in a particular period" is however as valid today as it was at the turn of the century.

Avant garde art critically re-examines itself and continually re-adjusts its strategies, preventing it from degenerating into easy formulae. In that sense it is always dependent on history whilst at the same time, being a reaction against it.

It is diametrically opposed to propaganda, which sets out to present only that which serves its cause best, and in its particularism is unable to sustain any real criticism. The message must be absolutely clear. "Ambiguity and Contradiction are completely shut out." Previously culture that perceived itself to be a weapon of the struggle, often degenerated into a state dangerously close to propaganda, in its strict insistence on being politically correct. Sachs points out, "In the case of a real instrument of struggle, there is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose."

The avant garde relies on ambiguity or contradiction, to question the values of both its maker and viewer. In an interview, Braam Kruger, a prominent South African artist, noted, "I only really feel secure when I distrust the art that I am making. When you don't really know what the work is worth, and you think it's really bad, so you put it away, but when you next take it out and it still worries you, that's when it's subversive. I like that because the work is confronting me, undermining my values." In its subversiveness avant garde art will always be revolutionary. As soon as it is rendered impotent through inevitable recuperation, it ceases to be avant garde. In the search for new forms of expression, the avant garde sets up a healthy state of competitiveness. Artists find themselves competing with history as well as with each other to find a personal, unique

solution to the question of representation. This raises the general standard of art.

Visual over-exposure often leads to immunity. Andy Warhol's *Disaster Series* or *Race Riots* illustrates the numbing effect that repetition has on any emotionally laden subject matter. This is why avant garde art always critically reassesses both itself and its strategies. When artists in this country first began to paint fists, spears and guns, it was an effective form of resistance. In the same way that when you repeat a word over and over, it loses its meaning, fists, spears, and guns have become clichés, and lost any subversive potential they may have had.

When the peace parks first appeared late in 1985, they represented an art form whose optimism threatened to undermine the misery and ugliness of the townships. This was contrary to what apartheid had set out to achieve and so the security forces had to systematically destroy them. In Sachs' words, "It bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space."

It is important not to forget Nietzsche's words when attempting to criticise an aberration like apartheid: "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster."

The move away from art in the service of the struggle does not mean that art claiming to be apolitical may now be justified. All good art is political in the sense that it challenges the ideologies and cultural prejudices of both the viewer and the artist. Political art must be perceived less as a set of predictable subjects and more as a critique of social representations. It is a critical examination of the ideologies of social structures like race, sex, culture, class etc.

An artist remains a member of society and in that sense is responsible to it. Rather than reinforcing the values of a particular society, s/he should critically re-examine them through his/her art, and in the process slightly change them.

In *Resistance Art in South Africa* Robert Hodgins quotes Robert Rauschenberg saying, "If you see a picture and it doesn't somehow minutely alter your vision of life, then either it's a bad picture, or you're not looking properly."

Avant gardism is by its nature not as accessible as propaganda. For this reason it has often been dismissed as elitist. The mistake in this country has been to lower the standards of art, in the hope of appealing to a wider audience. This has only resulted in creating culturally lazy people and reducing the span of possible cultural appreciation.

Increasingly we encounter clichés debasing Eurocentric traditions. *Swan Lake* is suddenly compared with and seen as inferior to Zulu dancing. It becomes fashionable to pay lip service to Afrocentrism and denounce European values. This is unnecessarily counter-productive, reducing the range of possible modes of expression. South Africa is unique in its position of having the best and worst of both the First and Third worlds. It is only through the critical examination and mutual acknowledgement of these traditions, that a uniquely South African avant garde art may be born.

It is the responsibility of cultural workers to now raise the standards of their art, whilst at the same time raising the level of education of their audiences. Appropriately Sachs concludes, "This gives concrete meaning to the statement that the doors of learning and culture shall be opened".

Aan watter kant van die struggle is jy?

Gerrit Olivier

Eers gepubliseer in Vrye Weekblad Boeke, Somer/Herfs 1990

'n Mens wens daar was in party van die reaksies in Afrikaanse kringe op Albie Sachs se "Preparing ourselves for freedom" meer begrip vir wat die man inderdaad gesê het.

André le Roux praat in sy rubriek in *Die Burger* van 'n radikale ommekeer ten opsigte van wat by die Victoriavalberaad ooreengekom en besluit sou gewees het. Die beraadgangers sou volgens hom tot die eenvoudige gevolgtrekking gekom het dat kultuur 'n wapen in die stryd moet wees. En nou word dié standpunt skielik heeltemal deur Sachs ontken - weer eens volgens Le Roux, wat self lankal die lig gesien het en meen dat die res van die beraadgangers in die verleentheid sit sedert die baas van plan verander het.

"Preparing ourselves for freedom" is 'n diskussiestuk. Die aangewese reaksie daarop, sou ek meen, is om aan die gesprek deel to neem, nié om Sachs te misbruik ten einde aan jou eie standpunte 'n gesaghebbende status te verleen nie.

In "Preparing ourselves for freedom" sê Sachs hoegenaamd nie dat kuns en kultuur geen bydrae behoort te lewer tot die totstandkoming van 'n demokratiese en nie-rassige Suid-Afrika nie.

Hy reageer aan die begin van sy stuk teen dié soort kuns wat altyd 'n reaksie is op die verdrukker; wat dus vir sy bestaansreg afhanklik is van die verdrukker se aanwesigheid. 'n Kuns wat verval in die modus van protes, homself verdruk en verarm tot 'n aanklag of 'n kreet.

Sachs se stelling dat ANC-lede vir vyf jaar verbied moet word om te beweer "that culture is a weapon of struggle", is duidelik polemies en met die tong in die kies bedoel. In 'n sekere sin sien hy dat kuns nog altyd kan bydra tot 'n ander "struggle": die vestiging van 'n nuwe Suid-Afrika.

Dit beteken dat kuns vir hom - om met Lucebert te praat - die ruimte van die volledige lewe tot uitdrukking moet bring: die lewe ná apartheid, waarvoor ons wavragte verbeelding nodig gaan hê. 'n Mens sou dit 'n volgende, meer kreatiewe stadium in die stryd kon noem.

Musiek soos dié van Makeba en Abdullah Ibrahim het volgens Sachs reeds die politieke verdrukking verbygestreef: "It bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space." 'n Eie ruimte, eie tekste: dit is die uitdaging wat gestel word.

Ampie Coetzee het al in *Vrye Weekblad* gewys op die interessante ooreenkomste tussen hierdie siening en die vroeë essays van N.P. van Wyk Louw. 'n Paar maande gelede het Njabulo Ndebele in 'n artikel oor "Redefining relevance" (*Pretexts* 1:1, Winter 1989) veel diepsinniger as Sachs gepleit vir literatuur wat hom uit die rol van protes moet emansipeer om sy verantwoordelikheid vir alle teenstrydighede in die samelewing te dra. Sachs is nie 'n nuwe evangelie nie.

Net soos Sachs, praat Ndebele van die manier waarop kuns die subtiliteite van die private sfeer, kontradiksies en verborge spannings aan die lig bring. Hy pleit vir insig eerder as demagogie, en wys daarop dat die kunstenaar wat lesers tot handeling sou wil aanspoor, altyd met ironie as strukturele eienskap van die politieke situasie te make sal kry:

> Irony is the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction. Its fundamental law, for the literary arts in particular, is that everything involving human society is in a constant state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic, and that consequently, in the representation of human reality, nothing can be taken for granted.

Die opvatting dat daar twee eenvoudige posisies is waartussen die kunstenaar of kritikus moet kies - staan jy aan die

kant van die "struggle" of nie? - is 'n gevaarlike retoriese vereenvoudiging wat aan beide kante van die debat voorkom. Aan beide kante is daar ook 'n neiging om van die teenparty 'n drogbeeld te maak.

Teenoor die kultuuraktivis, die bleek esteet; teenoor die persoon wat kuns volledig by die stryd wil inskakel, die een wat daaraan 'n geheiligde posisie bó die konflik toeken; teenoor die een met sy hart op die regte plek, die hooghartige kritikus wat universele estetiese kriteria op 'n strydgedig afdwing.

Die manier waarop Sachs se uitsprake "verwelkom" word deur mense wat nog nie twee keer nagedink het oor die ANC se posisie nie, is soms 'n verleentheid om aan te hoor: die gebaretaal van die interregnum, die vlaggies wat geswaai word. As dit so voortgaan, sal die mense uit verveling liewer 'n kannetjie wyn begin leegmaak as om na 'n debat oor kuns te luister.

Dit spreek vanself dat mense wat sterk oor politieke verandering voel, sal wil hê dat die letterkunde daartoe sy bydrae lewer. Het iemand beswaar daarteen? Sulke kuns moet aagemoedig word - maar dan met die besef dat die heel eiesoortige probleme wat op hierdie gebied bestaan, nie geïgnoreer kan word nie.

My voorbeeld kom uit 'n onlangse publikasie. Ek neem aan dat Ampie Coetzee en Hein Willemse nie te agterdogtig sal opkyk as 'n mens op hulle uitdagende stellings in die inleiding tot *I Qabane Labantu* (Taurus, 1990) reageer nie. In hierdie "diskussiestuk" sê die samestellers die volgende:

> Gedagtig aan die feit dat die kanon Letterkunde deur die Literêre Kritiek geproduseer word, dat dit die diskoers is waarvolgens tekste gesistematiseer en aangedui word binne 'n kultuur, gee ons doelbewus hier nie 'n oorsig van vormgewing, soeke na gepaste idiome, samevattings van verskillende style, taalgebruike, en 'n oorsig gebaseer op die standaard van 'n verabsoluteerde algemene estetiek nie.

Dis 'n sin waarmee die samestellers die letterkundige se toegang tot die bloemlesing wil versper. Hoekom? Omdat Literêre Kritiek - die hoofletters dui al 'n baie wantrouige houding

aan - vir hulle 'n sistematiserende, evaluerende en uiteindelik kanoniserende *magsdiskoers* is.

'n Mens kan begryp waarom Coetzee en Willemse die gedigte in die bundel wil beskerm teen die soort meerderwaardighede kruheid wat Stephen Watson byvoorbeeld al geopenbaar het in sy bespreking van strydliteratuur. Maar 'n letterkundige - met 'n kleinletter, asseblief - sal voel dat belangrike vrae in hulle inleiding onder die tafel verdwyn.

Die samestellers dring daarop aan dat die "poësie in die noodtoestand" van *I Qabane Labantu* "binne die konteks van people's poësie" beoordeel moet word, waar die effektiewe kommunikasie met 'n gehoor vir die digters self die deurslaggewende faktor in die geslaagdheid van die gedig is.

Ek aanvaar dit, maar slegs gedeeltelik. Baie min lesers sal ooit in die geleentheid gestel word om een van hierdie gedigte in sy orale konteks aan te hoor. Die gedigte word in *I Qabane Labantu* as leesstof aangebied, waar hulle baie effektief, minder effektief of soms byna glad nie tot die leser spreek nie - dié leser wat hom die werklike voordrag slegs in geringe mate kan voorstel, maar nie om hierdie rede sommer net stilgemaak kan word nie.

Ek vermoed dat daar 'n ander veronderstelling grondliggend aan Coetzee en Willemse se uitsprake is: die gedagte dat strydliteratuur regstreeks deur die materiële omstandighede van die mense geproduseer word, en dus heeltemal buite die geabstraheerde estetiek van die Letterkundige beoordeel moet word. Dit is 'n standpunt wat Coetzee in Desember 1989 by die Skrywersgilde gestel het.

Toegegee: die ervaring van die townships deel ons nié - maar is daar 'n opvatting van taal wat hierdie beskouing van literatuur as direkte weerspieëling kan ondersteun? Nie sover aan my bekend nie. Taal staan in 'n simboliese verhouding tot die werklikheid, altyd; dit is nie 'n onskuldige of deursigtige, neutrale medium waardeur die realiteit in sy onvervalste vorm aan ons deurgegee word nie.

Dit beteken dat die aktivis wat besluit dat hy die stryd deur middel van 'n gedig gaan voer, hom uit die staanspoor in 'n ander stryd bevind: die stryd om "vormgewing, soeke na gepaste idiome, . . . verskillende style, taalgebruike" en dies meer - alles wat Coetzee en Willemse opsyskuif.

By die lees van *I Qabane Labantu* raak 'n mens gefassineer deur die literêre stryd wat in die bundel aan die gang is. Daar is 'n geweldige uiteenlopendheid in people's poësie, en meer as een digter streef juis na literêre aanvaarbaarheid volgens "Europese" norme. Een ding word vir die leser duidelik: al voel iemand hoe sterk oor die struggle, is daar ook in die konteks van people's culture vir hom of haar klaarblyklik geen voor-die-hand-liggende en noodsaaklike manier waarop die stryd tot uiting sal kom nie.

Vir die gepolitiseerde digter is die soeke na die beste woord 'n baie materiële arbeid met die glibberige ding wat taal is: tussen al die gevestigde en verbygaande maniere om aan die werklikheid en gevoelens uiting te gee - in die literatuur, op vergaderings, in die straat - soek hy 'n taal en 'n idioom wat die gewenste retoriese effek op die mense moet hê, wat hulle sal mobiliseer in taal, hulle sal behaag, hulle bewussyn sal opskerp.

Dit is 'n proses wat deur die letterkundige beskryf en ontleed kan word, en waaruit hyself en waarskynlik ook die people baie kan leer. Ek sien geen rede waarom so 'n bemoeienis van die letterkundige tot die kanonisering - lees: verdrukking - van tekste hoef te lei nie. Daarom voel 'n mens 'n bietjie ongelukkig as Coetzee en Willemse al hierdie belangrike sake as 'n "verabsoluteerde algemene estetiek" verpak en dan aan die Literêre Kritiek met 'n hoofletter pasella gee. Dié werk is te interessant om aan die burokrate oorgelaat te word. Bowendien: al wat dan nog vir ons sou oorbly om te doen, is om die seënende hand oor people's poësie uit te strek.

Ek weet nie so mooi wat die "verabsoluteerde algemene estetiek" is waarna die samestellers verwys nie. Maar ek dink dis veilig om te sê dat die estetiek van die literêre diskoers, ten spyte van die pogings om dit aan te pas, te wysig of te vervang, vandag nog die enigste beskikbare model in die gesprek oor letterkunde is. Baie dinge in daardie estetiek kan vrugbaar deur people's poësie aangewend word om 'n nuwe ruimte, nuwe tekste en 'n nuwe taal te vind. Dit lyk selfs of sommige bydraers in *I Qabane Labantu* 'n goeie begrip van 'n oeroue fenomeen soos die oorredingskuns het.

'Underneath the fists are open and vulnerable eyes'

Brenda Cooper

Talk given at a Centre for African Studies seminar, University of Cape Town, 5th March 1990

This phrase will be used by me, evocatively and symbolically to herald *the new space* that I believe Sachs to be opening up - i.e., he is distancing himself from *both* a humourless, dictatorial one-dimensional and Stalinist left tendency, one that demands a disciplined obedience even to the misprint, that dictates form, content, plot, flags, ruddy red cheeks and clenched fists and that excommunicates heretics, narrowly defined.

However, he is *by no means* returning, penitent and reformed, as some would have us believe, to the old and deceptive bourgeois fold. It is deceptive in its pretence that anything goes - the whole range - trees, love, politics, etc. and conceals *its own* as vicious and real sets of prescriptions about art - the individual rather than the political, hatred for so-called 'isms', form rather than content. No, and this is the heart of my presentation - Albie Sachs is pointing to a new space - one that calls for both better art and inextricably linked to it, better politics. He is emphatically not rejecting the deeply entwined relationship between art and politics. He is insisting that the relationship is complicated, that the demands of art are complicated and that the political, especially as appearing within the discourse of art, is complicated. Better art - better politics. 'Underneath the fists are open and vulnerable eyes'. There is pain, there is uncertainty, there

is a thirst for the truth, there are fists. A new space. Certainly others have said it but they remain the exceptions that prove the rule. The new space needs a new language, which does not really exist yet. Hence everybody claiming Albie for their own and my dependence upon a motif.

A crucial point, however, is to contextualise Sachs's comments. It is less important to him to worry about the bourgeois or liberal tradition that is welcoming him back into their arms, than the left debate that concerns him and that he is opening up. He acknowledges his own past of lack of recognition of art and culture's particular needs and demands. The main purpose, perhaps for him the only purpose, of his remarks is to encourage debate and open up room to breathe, within a left and progressive context - his paper was an ANC in-house seminar on culture. However, for many of us working within the context of teaching at the University of Cape Town, it does remain important to illustrate the new space being opened in contrast to both the bourgeois prescriptions and those of the narrow left.

Let me try to concretise that space by way of reference to Sachs's paper itself. I will take four examples.

Example one

> 'If we had the imagination of Sholokhov, and one of us wrote: And Quiet Flows the Tugela, the central figure would not be a member of UDF or Cosatu, but would be aligned to Inkatha, resisting change, yet feeling oppression, and through his or her struggles and torments and moments of joy, the reader would be thrust into the whole drama of the struggle for a new South Africa. Instead, we line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other . . . the good ones can all recite sections of the Freedom Charter or passages of Strategy and Tactics at the drop of a beret.'

He is saying to the dictatorial left - do not be so boring, predictable and one-dimensional in your art and in your politics. Abandon the noxious formulas of socialist realism. If Sachs has wryly called for a ban on the term struggle in relation to culture it is because this left dictatorship has lost the meaning of the word. The Inkatha character in Sachs's imaginary novel

with conflicting emotions who is oppressed yet resists change could exemplify some of 'the drama of the struggle for a new South Africa.'

At the same time he is not suggesting that the political difference between Inkatha and UDF is irrelevant and inappropriate to art. He is not suggesting that the quietly flowing Tugela, symbolic of the permanence of nature, will outlive and ultimately be more significant than those temporal differences between Cosatu or Inkatha - as the bourgeois novel would have written it. In the very next paragraph he emphasises - *'But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions.'* This, surely, is only possible with an advanced and complex political analysis.

A new space.

Example two

> 'And what about love? . . . Can it be that once we join the ANC we do not make love any more, that when the comrades go to bed they discuss the role of the white working class? . . . What are we fighting for if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world? There is nothing that the apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly.'

He is saying to narrow left prescriptiveness - stop writing those awful, contrived and boring novels in which earnest political humans fall into intense conversations about the future of the country, the strategy to be followed, etc. He is insisting on life's multidimensionality where the political entwines with the sensual, the fantastic, the inevitability of death. He is saying that art and culture are fertile spaces to explore this multidimensionality in a progressive way. He is not saying - leave the ANC and make love.

He is saying that one of the ways of fighting the ugliness of apartheid is to prevent its gangrene from infusing one's entire view of life, which leads to an amputation of life itself and a victory for the ruling class. He is talking about the many ways of opposing apartheid's ugliness. He is talking about the forma-

tion of a 'new consciousness' - a joy and a sensuality that defies oppression, *not* one that substitutes for resistance.

A new space.

Example three

> 'The more fists and spears and guns, the better. The range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded.'

Sachs is rejecting here what he calls 'solemn formulas of commitment' - he is not saying any politics will do. He is saying any topic, any plot, any lyric can be used creatively, and sometimes, the strike or the bomb in the context of art or music, is not the most fertile or imaginative plot to use. He enlarges:

> 'Dumile, perhaps the greatest of our visual artists, was once asked why he did not draw scenes like one that was taking place in front of him: a crocodile of men being marched under arrest for not having their passes in order. At that moment a hearse drove slowly past and the men stood still and raised their hats. "That's what I want to draw," he said.'

Sachs is not saying that carrying passes is O.K. or at least less important than the fact that we all die. He is saying that art may have to search for different kinds of inspiration than that fuelling historical or political discourse, but not that art need not be historically wise or politically astute.

Final example

> 'We need to accept broad parameters rather than narrow ones: the criterion being pro- or anti-apartheid. In my opinion, we should be big enough to encompass the view that the anti-apartheid forces and individuals come in every shape and size, especially if they belong to the artistic community'.

His word here to the left is - let your parameters be broad. Loosen up and recognise idiosyncrasies, eccentricities - so interesting and prevalent in art circles.

To the smug bourgeois pretence at total tolerance he retains the insistence on parameters, as they do. He does not say anything goes - he talks about *anti-apartheid* forces and individuals . . .

In conclusion and overarching all of these examples and their logical outcome, is Sachs's timely injunction - 'let us write *better* poems and make *better* films and compose *better* music'. What he is saying is that sloppiness is not democratic, standards are not elitist - better art, better politics.

'Underneath the fists are open and vulnerable eyes.'

Vampire bats of ambiguous metaphors

Rushdy Siers

Talk given at a Centre for African Studies seminar, University of Cape Town, 5th March 1990

Introduction

Trying to make critical sense of Albie Sachs's paper, 'Preparing ourselves for freedom', is worse than being confronted, in a dark treacherous cave, with a nightmare of vampire bats gone mad. On the other hand, if you are of the opinion which has gained considerable uncritical popularity that Albie Sachs was merely trying to be provocative, leaving as it were, the intention of his words to fly amok, there is little need for you to entangle yourself with Albie Sachs's vampirish denizens escaping from his hidden agenda of cultural confusion.

Let me introduce you to some of the vampires Albie has unleashed upon us and with whom we'll have to do battle, for the sake of dear blood-loving life; firstly we will try to discover who Albie is addressing, secondly to look at his comparative models of cultural excellence, thirdly to deliberate whether culture is a weapon of struggle, fourthly ponder upon 'culture making its input on the Constitutional Guidelines' and finally to see if there is 'some good in the bad' as Albie Sachs suggested.

Who is the audience?

It is understood that the paper in question was delivered at an in-house ANC seminar. And may I add, if his paper displayed the rigour in confining his address to a specific audience and with the same rigour and discipline attempted to address a specific internal problem within the ranks of the ANC in exile, it will serve us little purpose to ponder upon the weight of Albie Sachs's argument for the mere sake of being informed of the problems facing our comrades in exile, as important as the problem well is. If that was indeed the case, one wonders why it has become the most sensational bit of literature to have hit the cultural scene here in South Africa.

It is clear that Albie Sachs attempted to address, in one foul swoop, a specific problem he identified and the *apparent* problems facing South African culture as a whole.

Already opinions from all quarters are emerging, not so much to address the problems facing the comrades of the movement in exile but to address the paper as if it were intended for all South Africans. A return to freedom is, of course, another question.

The address of the paper throughout jumps from its immediate audience, our comrades in exile, to a larger identifiable South African audience. That the comrades living in exile at the moment have an extremely difficult task to catch up, as it were, with internal developments when they return is a truth. The truth of that reality becomes even more bedeviling if some of Albie's prescriptive propositions are taken seriously; for example: 'our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I suggest a period of five years.'

What a bizarre scenario seems to pop up: bouquets of roses on Casspirs and ratels, ozone-friendly labels on mustard gas, greeting cards on bullets, violets on tin shacks, 3 million unemployed sending wishes of solidarity to the state, kwashiorkor and TB riddled infants singing 'all we need is love'.

It is just as well that Albie Sachs return as soon as possible to witness for himself the present reality. And rediscover that he indeed knows what it is and not be misled by his opening suggestions, 'We all know where South Africa is, but we do not

yet know what it is.' Has it not been on the basis of our understanding of the South African reality that we began to organise ourselves to change it? A commitment to change manifest in our day-to-day struggle which has been continuously inspired by the Freedom Charter. The inspiration and ideals of which must be fought for thus determining what South Africa should and must be like at the very least.

Admittedly, we do not know what tensions the present phase of our struggle will bring to the surface as the ANC prepares for negotiations. But despite the fact that the majority of our people have been deprived, oppressed and exploited there are very positive indications which have unfolded in our process of struggle to suggest that we have begun to develop the creative or 'cultural imagination', as Albie Sachs calls it, to grasp the rich texture that a free and united South Africa will reveal and not that it has already revealed as he also suggests.

Having therefore determined that our comrades in exile and we at home are the subjects of Albie's address we can therefore continue, on the somewhat shaky ground he has laid before us.

Models of cultural excellence

That Miriam Makeba, Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwanga have proven to attain certain heights of cultural excellence is unquestionable.

One wonders, however, if these models of cultural excellence which have cumulatively spent almost 100 years outside the restrictive and oppressive atmosphere of South Africa should be contrasted, as Albie Sachs has done, with the cultural workers living in the exile camps and here at home in the ghettoes of apartheid.

The likes of the artists Sachs mentioned have been given that unique and privileged opportunity to test their skills and talents with the best of the world. Thereby gaining invaluable experience in developing their skills and broadening their perspectives which have made them international stars of esteem. In the process some authorities on music would argue that some of the musicians mentioned above have lost that South African

sensitivity and sensuality which once gave them the initial international recognition and thrust to fame and fortune. That, however, is not my argument. My argument is that it is exposure, exchange of ideas, interaction and indeed the socio-economic and political environment that cultural workers find themselves in, that are the determining factors in the production of artistic work.

And the musicians Albie Sachs referred to seem to prove the point. These models of excellence which he uses as his yardstick raise yet another important consideration for our cultural development and one which I do not wish to deliberate on other than to mention it because soon we will have to entertain the question very seriously. The question as you might have guessed is one of developing and determining a new aesthetic or standard of excellence for our culture. Suffice it to say, therefore, that as much as I agree with Albie Sachs's praise for these artists it is very problematic in the face of what has been revealed to place them in contrast to our artists living at home or in the exile camps elsewhere.

Culture a weapon of struggle

Under much provocation, I must admit, we must once again debate whether culture is a weapon of struggle. And I would like to propose that if we do so, we must take as our point of departure the very broad and not the narrow specific definitions of particular forms of culture. The reason being that contained within Albie Sachs's paper both the narrow and broad definitions are used without explicit qualification. Our broad definition would therefore cover both understandings.

In my view the question of whether culture is a weapon of struggle can only be raised if one does not have a clear understanding of what culture is in the first place. And reading Albie Sachs's paper it becomes clear that he too suffers from a misunderstanding. The misunderstanding stemming from his own admission and attitude in determining when art, as he says, or culture should be used as a weapon of struggle.

Culture is and will always be the expression of people's lived reality; it is the way we live, love, dress, abstract, think, create and certainly how we organise ourselves as a collective group. Which in the last instance will always be determined by the economic environment.

There are arguments that suggest that certain pursuits of art and science are or have freed themselves from those determining conditions. And because of their unique or relative autonomy their development and progress are far less determined by what happens on the *ground*.

Despite these celebrations of human intelligence and excellence, human culture is and will still be largely determined by material conditions. Unless of course we rediscover the magic lantern of Aladdin we lost in our very early youth. Since, therefore, we do not have at our disposal obedient genies to lay before us lavish feasts of delight when we hunger, we have to accept this simple fact of life: No food no life.

So how does all this understanding contribute to the question whether culture is a weapon of struggle?

Let us take my earlier assertion, or truism, that without food we cannot live and if we cannot sustain life we can certainly not reproduce it. It is in the process of reproduction that culture rears its 'contentious' head. It is in the process of reproduction that we find contestation emerging. Contestation between the forms of our organising; the political, social, economic, etc. And as we know certain forms of political, social and economic organisation tend to favour certain kinds of class and 'race' relationships. Is South Africa not an excellent case to support the point?

Hence people finding themselves on either side of the 'favour line' develop their own lifestyles, which apparently seem to co-exist and appear non-antagonistic because the form of organisation in all its other aspects will support and legitimise through its educational and relational structures the existing forms of lifestyles; repeatedly the process of reproduction reminds us that what we witness is indeed the normal order of the day. And have we not seen even religion used to this end - suggesting that God is indeed happy with the existing *state* of affairs.

The very act of questioning the normality of society exposes the antagonism of the different lifestyles/cultures. The very act of organising around such understanding draws culture/people's lifestyles into conflict. Culture, therefore, whether you like it or not becomes the weapon of the opposing forces. The one trying to reproduce what it is like today, tomorrow. And the other contesting that reproduction. Contesting its claim of being normal and legitimate. Now let us get back to Albie's proposition which looking from his point of view, tends to suggest that all the ANC cultural workers in exile and here at home have for so many years followed the prescription that culture is a weapon of struggle and now all of a sudden think that a mere proposition would reverse the thinking and attitude of the ANC membership (real genie stuff). Sad is the day if there is but one cultural worker who followed this uncritical prescription, sadder still if one could imagine regiments of ANC cultural workers following the misunderstanding of Albie on what culture is.

Has South African culture reached such dizzy heights of mathematics and physics which have predicted the existence of the black hole? Are the cultural expressions of our people not based on a simple truism that if there is no food we cannot live? And more, are our cultural manifestations not decorated with vivas, raised fists, dilapidated corrugated shacks, mutilated bodies, AK's and Amandla's? Is Albie becoming ashamed of this culture, this reality? Its militancy and somewhat oppressive nature? Is this an attempt to show the 'civilised' western world we are capable of doing better? An attitude suggestive of: 'We can be like you just wait and see have no fear just give us "five years".'

The culture we have witnessed emerging from the oppressed and exploited people of South Africa has a militant, somewhat oppressive, Amandla, and fist raising atmosphere about it. Yet, it is that very culture which is contesting the normality of the existing *state* of affairs. It is a culture that has been denied the privilege to contemplate the beauty of roses. In all its apparent ugliness and oppression, it is the very culture which desires to create the space wherein we can begin to appreciate the beauty of nature and the intimacies of our beings.

Albie's preposterous proposition therefore is baseless and in addition attempts to legitimise, normalise, the present period. A period which now more than ever is asking for a creative and critical response and not lame shortsighted strategical approaches. Sad as it is, his appealing strategy has succeeded in certain ways. Listen to Prof Dubow tap-toying on his carpeted floors at the Michaelis School of Art (I have taken the liberty to creatively represent the gist of Dubow's response published in the *Cape Times* February 1990): 'I told you so Albie, I told you so. It's taken you a long time Albie. Don't worry, what matters now you eventually got around to my kind of thinking. Let's normalise, let's legitimise the art, the culture you have for so long decried as bourgeois, legitimising art. Jolly good ol' fellow.' In the process Albie has done more harm than is apparent. As a little reminder to Prof Dubow: reflect for a moment on the number of black students who left the Michaelis School of Art. An environment which they found to be totally Euro-centric in its approach and insensitive to the cultural heritage of Africa and its people.

And what about the obscure left and little brighter than pink liberals? Who are still today, perhaps not discussing with their lovers 'the white working class' but philosophising whether 1976 was indeed a watershed year or not. They too have found in Albie Sachs's paper something of a mental balm to soothe the frightening scenes of spontaneous mass action and a culture which is somewhat militant, somewhat political, not very subtle but never sweet.

Culture and the constitutional guidelines

Just when we thought it was safe to venture into the world of cultural definitions - up springs another surprise. Not a people's culture, not South African culture, not workers' culture, not liberation culture, not a culture of resistance but an ANC culture. I will not attempt to even deliberate upon the question, perhaps Albie Sachs alone can answer that one. But these kinds of ambiguity like the bats in the cave have developed method in their madness.

As we were shocked to confront yet another culture begging definition we encounter a stratagem of intellectual gymnastics; I quote: 'And this brings me to my second challenging proposition, namely, that the Constitutional Guidelines should not be applied to the sphere of culture,' declares Albie Sachs, anticipates his audience's question and asserts: 'Precisely it should be the other way around. Culture must make its input to the Guidelines.' Hold on Albie, I recall you earlier proposed that we must be banned from using the phrase that culture is a weapon of struggle. Meaning therefore the culture that must make its input must be that culture free from the fist raising, AK wielding cadres living in those depressing landscapes revealed in the linocuts you referred to earlier. The culture that must make its input to the Guidelines must be a 'LOVELY' culture aspiring to the heights of the models of excellence you mentioned earlier. In a word, the culture that must make its input to the Guidelines must be decapitated of its political and militant head. A culture sucked dry by those vampire bats of ambiguous metaphors.

Is there good in the bad?

Yes, I would venture there is always good in the bad. Though I am opposed to bourgeois culture and capitalism, I would indeed be misguided to think that bourgeois culture and capitalism has not contributed significantly to the progress of humanity as a whole. We need only reflect for a moment on the colossal strides made in the fields of the sciences and technologies and the massive energy unleashed by the employment of the forces of production. Capitalism has indeed put humanity on a brink of productive excellence whereby it can literally feed the world from the productive output of the superpowers alone. That is the good and at the same time it is the bad because capitalism and its bourgeois culture is incapable of accepting the equitable distribution of the products of our labour. Such an equitable distribution poses the most crucial challenge to capitalist culture. It challenges the very nature of its class relations to the means of production and the very reproduction of

those classes and their relations. The irony of the situation is of course that the oppressed and exploited people all over the world have not had the opportunity to see the good side of the bad and no amount of intellectual persuasion would be able to do that.

And what about the good in Albie Sachs's paper? If, as some people believe, he was merely trying to be provocative, then surely he has succeeded. That is good. And if we were to take certain statements and thoughts contained in his paper, we will obviously find much good - providing of course they are taken in isolation. In context, however, Sachs's paper shares something in common with the vampire bats - something they are notorious for.

In conclusion I would like to add that I think Albie Sachs is indeed concerned with the present state of affairs as it concerns our arts and culture. We are aware that we have to embark on a massive programme of reconstruction and education. To broaden our perspectives, to sharpen our skills and crafts and most important to release our cultural, critical and creative insights. Albie Sachs and everyone has the right to criticise and question the existing state of affairs. There are a few considerations, however, that should guide our concern: we need to place our criticism in a political, social and economic context. We must be informed of what is happening and not accept the given and apparent as the sum total of a reality. And perhaps most important, considering the deprivation suffered by the oppressed and exploited people of South Africa, proceed with understanding and sensitivity.

To comrade Albie Sachs

I find the weight of words and argument unbearable when sensitivity has been lost. At the welcoming rally for comrade Mandela on the parade in Cape Town I saw two 'bergies' join the jubilation and toyi-toying multitudes. Passing before us the one said to the other: 'Naai, ou pal Amandla is ose regte baas nie die boere nie.' (He meant Mandela of course).

I found in that simple observation a profound awakening of consciousness which I would not have thought possible to emerge from a mind soaked in methylated spirits.

I do not wish to make any other point about this incident other than to remind us of the social deprivation and degradation suffered by the 'bergies' and the immediate, conscious (almost poetic) response to a socio-political event (perhaps an analogy to be drawn to other cases of social deprivation - our artists and poets in the ghettoes?).

THE THREE AMANDLAS

Amandla!
crowded is the vacuum
in the wake of rallying calls
as anxiety, fear and aspirations prowl searchingly around

substantiated the vision of paranoia
as pregnant clouds of aesthetic, blown from foreign shores,
suspend themselves inches above the poets' heads

an echo freezes
as it witnesses a tri-syllabyled expression
being baptised in 3 centuries of human blood

a far away critic so struck by this passion
pierces a left eye with an educated pen -
the cells of rationale run red

and again, fearing what is seen,
pierces then a right eye -
pearls of creative plasma gush forth

blinded, the critic's feet begin to
toyi-toyi fed by sensitive rhythms pulsing from the ground
insight begins to infest the critic's mind

the critic becomes a poet
a less than audible 3-syllabled expression
escapes his quivering lips

gaining volume as it gallops thousands of miles
to mobilise, at home, a rhyming couplet
only to be found in the voice of the unorganised crowd

Surprise, responsibility and power

Karen Press

Talk given at a Centre for African Studies seminar, University of Cape Town, 5th March 1990.

Albie Sachs's paper raises so many important ideas that it would be impossible to deal adequately with all of them, or discuss all their implications, in one brief response such as this. There have, of course, already been several public responses to the paper, ranging from those of a patronising, liberal sort that seek to co-opt the paper's arguments into their own comfortable cultural laager, to the thoughtful and problematising responses of people deeply engaged in the cultural aspects of the liberation struggle. Of these, I'd like to mention particularly that of Frank Meintjies, which appeared in a recent edition of the *Weekly Mail*. Meintjies' response contains many points with which I fully agree, and I'm not going to repeat them here.

I'd like, however, to reinforce one of his introductory comments: like him, I assume that the tone of the Sachs paper was influenced by the fact that it was directed at an audience who did not need to be told about the political character of the liberation struggle on the cultural front as elsewhere. I don't think that the absence of a certain level of political rhetoric in Albie Sachs' argument makes the argument incompatible with such political discourse.

What I would like to focus on, in my comments on the paper, is its implication for practising artists who see their work within the broad framework of the liberation struggle. I've organised

my comments in terms of three concepts: surprise, responsibility and power.

Surprise

In the course of his argument, Albie Sachs talks of many different features which he would like a liberating/liberated culture to have. He talks of "sufficient cultural imagination", "quality", "range of themes", "ambiguity and contradiction", "invention, modulation of mood", the need to "break free from the solemn formulas of commitment". He says that culture is produced by "people in all their complexity", that we should "acknowledge and take pride in cultural variety".

I read all of these, and particularly the phrase "culture of the imagination" as an invitation to artists to surprise their audiences. I know that for some people, the notion of leaving it up to individual artists to choose what they want to do is a terrifying one - there is a belief that any artist left to his or her own devices will only want to produce the sort of art that makes private art galleries, commercial publishers and state theatres rich. I want to argue, however, that the artist's capacity to surprise and enrich an audience - by offering them an interpretation, a re-telling, a celebration of their reality that they *could not have asked for in advance* - is a great part of what makes art valuable to people. And this capacity is in no way contradictory to the idea of art as progressive, politically conscious or socially responsible.

I think a common attitude amongst some of those making demands on artists for the production of a "culture of liberation" is to want a sort of "church art" - in which the content of the art (scripture), the basic forms (sermons, hymns) and the way in which the artist and the audience relate, are determined by the "church authorities" - the priests and elders. So the artist can write new hymns, but always reflecting a "religious message" already determined. And the audience is allowed to hear these "hymns" because the *priests* have decided that they deal appropriately with the themes concerned.

For me, this paradigm is completely unsuitable for the creation of a liberatory culture in the context of a struggle for true social revolution. Firstly, one needs to grant to artists the freedom to respond in terms of their *own* understanding, style and skills to the world which is the subject matter of their art. And secondly, one needs to give audiences the right to interact directly with the artist: to accept, reject, praise, criticise the art that is presented to them, instead of receiving this art via the channels of political approval which decide on their behalf whether or not it "reflects their interests". I think an important theme in Albie Sachs' paper is that art is too big an activity, too full of possibilities in its forms and its effects on people, for any one group to be able to lay down rules or to make predictions about the way it must or will affect people.

This brings me to my second concept.

Responsibility

To say that artists should have the freedom to produce whatever they like, is in no way to take away from them a responsibility for what they produce. Any artist can, of course, make whatever satisfies his or her personal obsessions, in the privacy of the locked studio. But if the artist decides to place that work in the public domain, to ask for an audience's interest and support, then the artist must take on the responsibility that goes with such a public contract. And, for its part, the audience which wants to enjoy the products of artistic work must accept a certain sort of responsibility in relation to the artist.

"Responsibility", here, means various things.

Firstly: the artist who wants (and it is a *choice* we are talking about) to make poems or paintings or plays that deal with the struggle for freedom and justice in society - and this includes art dealing with subjects that are not explicitly "political" - must do the work required to understand that struggle, and must accept that whatever he/she produces will have political significance. If artists don't want to have to mouth the slogans or analyses of political programmes (even the ones they agree with) in their art, they must accept that they'll have to develop

their own political analysis, and create their own aesthetic vocabulary for expressing it. Likewise, artists who "want nothing to do with politics", must be prepared for the possibility of audiences finding their work less than relevant to their lives.

Secondly: artists who want to expose their work to audiences must take on the responsibility of setting up independent channels for reaching those audiences. It is no good bleating on endlessly about being the victims of the capitalist cultural institutions, or subject to the control of political organisations with their own agendas - *of course* these structures will want to use artistic work to further their own ends. Artists need to address the problem of reaching audiences in constructive ways, instead of retaining the passive, exploited role that they have always had in bourgeois society.

Thirdly: audiences - and this translates in practice into community groups, trade union groups, and so on - must acknowledge that artists need certain basic facilities in order to work: space, equipment, critical interest and encouragement. There is so much possibility for developing relationships of mutual interaction between communities and the artists who live and work in them - this is an area we have hardly begun to explore.

Which leads to my last concept.

Power

One cannot pretend that such fruitful relationships between artists and audiences can take place in isolation from the broad struggle for democratic power relations in South Africa. That is, of course, the basic assumption in Albie Sachs' paper: that when the ANC *comes to power*, it should have a progressive cultural policy which it can implement. Sachs deals with this issue in a relatively subtle and complex way in the paper, arguing that the ANC should "lead by example, by the manifest correctness of [its] policies, and not rely on [its] prestige or numbers to push [its] positions through".

Many artists working inside the country have had experiences of a far less modulated approach to power: to put it simply, access to resources, involvement in cultural events, and ac-

knowledgement of artistic work have often depended on whether or not the artist was prepared to swear allegiance to an organisation within the "mass democratic movement". Even now, many of those responding to the challenge of Albie Sachs' paper do so on the assumption that any artist who wants to be part of a progressive political and cultural movement, must by definition align himself or herself with the politics of the ANC - as if there were no other political options open to artists within the liberation movement.

There is no question that in a future, liberated society artists and audiences are going to have to interact with political power structures, simply because certain types of resources for cultural activity cannot be made available except with the support of central or regional government. If the approach to culture outlined in Albie Sachs' paper does form the basis for a future government's policy on culture - whether this government is dominated by the ANC or by other parties - there is considerably more likelihood of genuinely free and democratic artistic work taking place in South Africa, than has seemed the case in recent years.

Postscript

Finally, I want to say something briefly about the argument - or plea - that threads all the way through the paper, for art of *quality*. What exactly makes for "good" art is a subject that will continue to give birth to academic theses for centuries to come - and of course the question will also need to continue being debated in the context of practical artistic activities in South Africa, before, during and after liberation. I only want to make one point about this question of quality. With the demand for quality goes a demand for artists to "learn their craft" - and there are many artists and aspirant artists inside South Africa who are desperate for opportunities to do just that: to receive guidance, support, training, constructive criticism, in the detailed technical aspects of their work.

I know that in all the branches of the arts there is an appalling lack of such opportunities. Nonetheless, there is at least some

vague understanding of the forms that such training could take, when it comes to arts such as film, theatre, music, dance. But for the writer, there is *nothing*. Individual writers rely heavily on the support and criticism of their writer friends. Organisations such as the Congress of South African writers (COSAW), SACHED and the Community Arts Project (CAP) have initiated the idea of writing workshops to serve this function; but there is virtually no input of ideas as to what such workshops should consist of, or what a writing course could look like. We simply don't have the experience of running programmes for creative writing, as opposed to academic writing or functional resource production.

I'd like to end by proposing that artists, cultural organisations and those with control over funding make some serious efforts to make available the resources that could help writers in South Africa to explore ways of improving their craft, and to increase the range of such opportunities in all branches of artistic activity.

The wrong ripple

Stacey Stent

Talk given at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, 15th March 1990

Albie Sachs paper about Albie Sachs paper continued . . . . . As someone said, put 40 assumptions down and what do you get? Another paper on the Albie Sachs paper. The responses to the paper are growing more numerous and more diverse and it is becoming necessary to give these responses as much consideration as the original paper itself.

The original paper has caused a ripple in the cultural world as well it should, but I can't help feeling that it is the wrong ripple. One interpretation has resulted in a gloating celebration that the ANC has stepped down and released its "Stalinist stranglehold" on art. This risks reducing the argument to the level that it has come close to at previous discussions, i.e. getting stuck in a groove of accusatory backing and forthing between political activists and non-activists which doesn't pave the way towards any constructive solutions. I think that Sachs' paper, through critical appraisal, can provide discussion for a way forward and I would prefer that the arguments (and there will be arguments) be steered in that direction.

It has been pointed out in Frank Meintjies' response (*Weekly Mail* 2nd March 1990) that we must remember that Albie Sachs' paper was delivered at an ANC seminar comprising people with a common political ethos. Sachs refers specifically to a cultural vision that responds to the *current phase in which a new South Africa is emerging*. Therefore the terms on which the paper

is read and received surely have to be seen that way. We must also remember that this paper is the only paper from that in-house seminar to be made public.

Most of us here, whether actively involved in political struggle or not, I presume subscribe to a democratic future where institutionalised leadership by the ANC is a viable option. Therefore the thrust of what I am going to try and present here today is *how do we go forward?*

Culture on the agenda

I have been a part of structures struggling to get culture onto the agenda of the mass based organisations, and find it ironic that at the very point where we have had some success, there is a move (linked to an interpretation of the Albie Sachs paper) to get it straight off again. The reason we have been wanting the mass based organisations to seriously look at culture isn't because we're falling over ourselves in our eagerness to agree to anything as soon as we see glimmers of interest and recognition from our leaders. Progressive cultural organisations want culture on the agenda so that we as cultural workers can sit on political forums and as such give active input into the decisions about culture. As Sachs says, "the ANC's cultural guidelines should not be applied to the sphere of culture, but . . . it should be the other way round: Culture must make its input into the guidelines". Culture is as Sachs states, "not merely an instrument to be hauled onto a stage" at ceremonies or meetings. This point has come up repeatedly in discussions, meetings etc within cultural organisations in the country. It is of concern to us that we don't become some kind of afterthought to slot neatly in to political events. Our culture is inevitably moving with our political growth and it is essential that our expression of that culture through the arts does not become sidelined or seen only as a service. Having recognised that concern it is up to the cultural workers within the movement to ensure that this does not happen.

New conditions, new tasks

Recently the broad political situation has offered us a set of new conditions and in many ways these conditions have been an inspiration to our struggle and our aspirations. But they have not lessened our tasks. If anything they have increased them. And this, in detailing and probing aspects of culture within the struggle, is what I think Sachs' paper is urging us to do.

Definition of struggle

This brings me to the question of the prevailing definition of our struggle.

1) The struggle was initially seen as predominantly a struggle of the black oppressed against their white oppressors.
2) The concept of the struggle then broadened to that of class and economics.
3) As the momentum and strength of the struggle increases, so it has come to embrace broader issues such as gender, ecology, etc. In other words, it has advanced on all fronts.

So this is not someone else's struggle out there. *It is a struggle that involves all those interested in a democratic future.*

Culture as a weapon

Sachs talks about rejecting the very basis of apartheid culture (i.e. the lining up of "a picturesque collection of separate ethnic and political cultures") and replacing it with a united culture made up of the different dynamics that are contained in this country so that the strength and unity of our culture lies in its very diversity. Now that, for the proponents of apartheid culture, can only sound like fighting talk. This is a cultural revolution he's talking about. This is culture being used as a weapon.

At this point, however, I'd better talk about fist and flag imagery, which is I think where everyone's mind leaps to when they think of culture being used as a weapon of struggle. I want to say why and how I think it is important.

Cultures often adopt visual prototypes with which they become identified. Sometimes these prototypes can cut right across class structures and political differences like the comic book images in the United States, and sometimes they are contained within a socio-political ethic, have an international interchangeability and like the fists and flags at marches and funerals, become the symbols of struggle of the colours depicted in the flag or the fist. These icons are an identifying force and have become important landmarks in our visual history. They are a public visual declaration of solidarity with international socialism (despite its changing face in Europe) and I believe are absolutely necessary as such. *But* it is unfortunate that these images and a few related ones are then seen as safe symbols of struggle in every sphere and are used repeatedly and indiscriminately. Often this is to blindly toe a political line but there are other reasons. And inhibition is not the least of them. Lack of inhibition in creating visual imagery and a fearlessness in approaching art are attributes that come with practice and/or training.

I want to take as an example the picture of Hector Peterson being carried through Soweto by his friend on June 16th 1976 as a prime example. This image has been used repeatedly for the last 14 years as a symbol of struggle. It has been drawn, silkscreened, etched, linocut, painted, sculpted, stencilled, used as graffiti. I have seen it being used in a hurried and careless way - a quick image for posters being printed on the night of June 15th - and have also seen it painted with care and respect and reverence by someone who apparently hadn't done much painting, but who was obviously moved in a very real way to seize on this image and paint it. Yet I'm sure this work could easily be overlooked as another piece of hack agit prop. At this point, I'm getting dangerously close to a subject even more contentious than that of art being used as a weapon of struggle - ie what is Art and what isn't and what is Good Art and what isn't - and I certainly don't intend going any further with that, but I will say that I found it a contradiction and a weakness in Sachs' paper that while constitutionally his democracy seems quite intact, in his call for good art he is fairly uncritical of the social structure that underlies the production of good art.

As Karen Press pointed out in her response to Sachs' paper (during a debate at the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town), cultural work on the ground is starved of training programmes, workshops, debates, etc. These are the skills of those who are undergoing or have undergone formal training. The question is: Why are so many of these skills being contained in the institutions that initiate them? I'm not suggesting that isolated numbers of artists should suddenly descend on unsuspecting groups of cultural workers imparting skills and announcing proposals. It could just be seen as a tad imposing and patronising.

There are existing structures that one can work through. The Visual Artists Group which is part of the CWC (Cultural Workers' Congress), a UDF affiliate, is one such structure. There are cultural wings of mass based organisations. There is a cultural movement within SANSCO (South African National Students' Congress). There are service organisations like MAPP (Musical Action for People's Power), CAP (Community Arts Project) and Afropix. There are members' organisations like COSAW (Congress of South African Writers). All these and more have links on the ground. It is not so much the ideas coming from the outside of organisations that are rejected by the organisations but what is often seen as a ducking of *procedure* by the proponents of those ideas. Democracy - the development of democracy - is a lengthy and delicate business and at this stage there are no short cuts to what are sometimes seen as unnecessary procedures.

Critics

Critics both inside and outside of the progressive cultural movement are nervous of what they see as possible prescriptiveness within politically based cultural groupings. The main prerequisite that exists for participating in these structures is an adherence to a goal which pledges to unite all cultural workers committed to a democratic, non-racist, non-sexist South Africa. Now, if people have a problem with that, then I imagine a paper by Albie Sachs would hardly be of relevance to them and their

debate would have to happen in another forum. There is obviously a resistance to apartheid culture, but ways of responding to the resistance are often inconsistent and certainly unformulated. There is a united support for the Cultural Boycott by many organisations but the way this issue has been addressed has been uneven.

If one wants to have input into these decisions surely one should address them through the democratic structures that are trying to reach decisions about them.

Action

There seems to be a bit of a doomsday attitude to engaging with organisational structures on the subject of culture and a presumption based on history that the only possible response to culture from a political organisation is a Stalinist response. We are, as Sachs describes, this extraordinary diverse mixture in South Africa. From the centre of the ANC he sees this as one of the greatest assets of the movement. If you believe there are Stalinists around go in and challenge them and ensure that the movement remains a democratic one.

In other words one can't fob oneself off by thinking that if one supports a broad principle as an idea that is all it takes to show your support. That is just where it begins. The rest is active participation. And it is time-consuming and often frustrating and sometimes painful but that is what commitment to an ideal is - not a cursory nod at some agreeable sounding principle, or the safe containment of one's ideas for a group of similarly minded people, but to go out there with one's knowledge and challenges and be prepared to learn as well as teach and for your own challenges to be equally challenged.

Running in the sackrace

Gavin Younge

Talk given at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, 15th March 1990

At the Grahamstown Winter School last year I titled a paper 'Art in Sudden Africa' (that's spelt s u d d e n) and gave it the subtitle 'Meddling with modern myths'. FW's announcement on the 2nd February underscored just how 'sudden' events can be. Today, I want to touch on the theme of 'suddenness' in respect of Albie Sachs' position paper on culture. The first point that needs to be made here is that his paper is a radical break with earlier pronouncements from ANC cadres. He has sought to be controversial and has renounced his earlier position, both publicly, and in an ANC forum.

So the first point I want to underscore is the extent of Sachs' break with the ruling sentiment. We all know that in May 1987, the President of the ANC referred to the alternative structures which were being created inside South Africa and said that these structures should not only not be boycotted, but that they should be encouraged. This raised all sorts of problems, not least of which was the problem of identifying what was, and what was not worthy of support. In the recent past there has been a blanket boycott against South African artists, performers and academics. In March 1987, the Chairman of the UN's Special Committee Against Apartheid wrote a letter to Professor Ucko, the national secretary to the World Archaeological Congress held at Southampton in 1986. The letter commended the Conference Organizing Committee for banning individual

South African and Namibian academics from attending irrespective of their personal records with regard to apartheid.

This resulted in many eminent delegates withdrawing from the conference (along with some of the funding) and it is clear that the ANC found it necessary to rethink their strategy. An important aspect of this rethinking was done at the ANC's conference in Arusha in December 1987. The suggestion that people who had left South Africa, for whatever reasons, were in a morally superior position to those who remained, either in rural poverty or busy with progressive programmes, or whatever, began to lose ground. People inside the country quite naturally wanted to know why exiles thought that they were qualified to make decisions on their behalf. At this conference the ANC undertook to initiate a process of consultation with democratic structures inside the country in order to identify appropriate guidelines in developing solidarity with what it called 'peoples' culture' without, at the same time, undermining the cultural boycott. In the same year, the ANC's Arts and Culture department participated in the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) conference in Amsterdam - this conference adopted a seven part preamble to thirteen resolutions. These do not make riveting reading so I will not read them out save to mention that a selective approach to the boycott was advocated and, and this is the part I want to emphasize, that many of the resolutions dealing with the different disciplines specifically affirm that art should be 'part of the struggle'.

Albie Sachs' statement that this term should be banned for at least five years is ironically intended, but I also think he meant it. Here I want to agree with what Karen Press and Brenda Cooper were saying at the recent debate on his paper held at the Centre for African Studies when they said they interpreted his remarks as being a call for greater 'modulation of mood', for 'better art and better politics'. We must remember that Sachs was addressing exiled artists who presumably already belonged to the ANC. His remarks about not using the term 'art is part of the struggle' were directed at those who used such terminology, not those who didn't. As far as the art at the CASA conference goes, I do not know what it looked like. Artists who did go to Amsterdam said that it was so diabolical that the

organizers hung it in an obscure hall in the deep suburbs of Amsterdam. Everyone appeared to be very embarrassed about it, especially as progressive art was defined as having a "humanist" and "internationalist" character. The book published on the CASA conference featured art which wasn't there!

To my mind, and I say this without any qualifying statement to the effect that it is gratifying to read in Sachs' paper that we are allowed to think for ourselves, the so-called international community has become the victim of its own policies. Albie Sachs and others have become tired of looking at the lino-cuts of casspirs and clenched fists their policies never tired of promoting. Perhaps the ANC was at a loss when, as a result of the boycott, publishers abroad refused to allow medical textbooks to be distributed here. The refusal of a film-maker to allow her/his work to be screened here can be applauded but what of recent aids research? Handbooks on farming methods and food production? The boycott gave companies a chance of appearing honorable. Kodak di-vested in a very public way but its very next advertising promotion was shot very quietly in South Africa. Not only was the boycott strategy full of loopholes, but more importantly, it provoked a vision of a future society without knowledge, without art, without science, compassion or hope. In short a vision of a doomed society. I am pleased that the ANC is trying to distance itself from the image it was previously cultivating for itself. That is, of judge and hangman to the arts and literature, science and the economy.

Before moving on to an aspect of Sachs' paper which has not been covered by others I would like to take up a point raised by Rushdy Siers in front of the Centre for African Studies audience two Mondays ago. He intimated that the ANC was out of touch with internal sentiment and that Sachs' examples of artists such as Masekela, Makeba et al were not applicable. I think this is an important observation and I would like to quote you a statement by a local artist who believes that art is part of the struggle. In July 1989, Sipho Hlati argued that "here in this country, one has got to take sides, you either collaborate with the state or you are together with the people . . . What I mean by using 'art as a weapon' is actually reveal the conditions, day to day activities and just leave it to teach these conditions through art".

There is no TV set in Hlati's house, he does not watch the coverage of events in South Africa to the same degree as do those in exile in London. He sees things from his point of view and I believe he has a right to see things as he does. I agree with Siers that Sachs is out of touch with sentiments inside the country. The myriad conference papers on South African culture with their 'noting this' and 'we hereby resolve that' are also out of touch with sentiments inside the country. One cannot have culture by decree.

Of course this freedom of choice I am ascribing here to Sipho Hlati is something Sachs advocates very unambiguously when he writes of the ANC's desire for leadership, not control. He writes that it is apartheid which has closed our society. He doesn't say, but I think it is true anyway, that the notion of full artistic freedom is anathema to many people associated with government ministries. Artistic freedom makes them foam at the mouth. By freedom, and this is something picked up by Brenda Cooper, is meant not simply the freedom to choose one's subject matter; artistic freedom, if it is to remain artistic, is the freedom to act socially. Works of art which deride the handicapped, which promote sadism, cruelty, sexism or racism have no place in our society. Of these, Sachs writes that like countries throughout the world, there may be laws prohibiting them. For the rest, he writes that there will be no censorship. He points out that at the moment South Africa is encumbered by censorship, by bannings and police having emergency powers. In the quieter world of artistic creation these elements of unfreedom do not always intrude. It is my belief that a space should be opened up for those artists who do hear the distant rumblings. Sachs' paper should not be read as vindication of the view that politics have no part in art.

Lastly, I want to draw attention to what is possibly his most important contention, that is, that the Constitutional Guidelines should not be applied to the field of culture. Instead he argues that it is the humanizing effects of culture which should impinge on the Guidelines. It is this contention, coupled with his proviso that the Guidelines still need to be discussed, that makes the most positive advance against domination and for autonomy. Without autonomy, artists cannot relate to the tan-

gled heritage, the revealed and severed traditions, the surge of composite transformations which convince us all of the cultural strength of a continent which was once thought dark.

All artists who have loved their tradition have had to disrupt it.

Tradition is the one quality that all revolutions have broken with. At the same time, tradition is the one quality most necessary to an understanding of art's affirmative social rôle. Thus as black South African artists have developed uniquely reflexive perspectives on their changing environment, one which is embracing evolving forms of human association, so too white artists have come to question the aesthetic traditions which are associated with colonialism.

There have been many false starts. Attempts to mobilize artists into one organisation dedicated to the building of one national South African art-style under the leadership of the proletariat have not gained much ground. Against this spirit of radicalism attempts have been made to construct genealogies out of the data of millennia rather than recent decades. If easel painting is synonymous with speculation, some like Paul Grendon, have turned to mural painting. Guy du Toit's miniatures recall the apparatus of pre-industrial society. Annette Pretorius affects alchemical alterations. Penny Siopis's rich surfaces deride rich practices. Stanley Hermans chronicles his street. Boetie Botha weaves his trace lines. Sculpture and painting is a historically bounded tradition. Whether or not any one tendency is chosen as 'truly South African' and thus appropriate to the task of setting up a transformational model is not something which can be decided solely in the realm of art. The necessary transformational model has to be sought elsewhere - in social processes and in the attitudes of commitment, modesty and courage of those artists who are prepared to re-enter the world from which their myths have separated them.

Responses to the Albie Sachs paper - "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom"

Report first published in the Writer's Notebook *Vol. 3 & 4, May 1990 (a COSAW Natal Region publication)*

"Preparing for Freedom", the controversial paper by Albie Sachs, formed the basis for one of the debates at the recent COSAW Regional AGM. The debate, despite its vibrancy, arrived at no consensus, and there was a general feeling that it needed more solid input at a local level; it needed time before any policy decision could emerge from it.

To stimulate discussion three brief position papers were presented. Firstly, Ronnie Govender agreed with most substantive points made by Sachs' paper, but argued that our art was part and parcel of the struggle, which needed its weapon. The better our art, the more effective in creating the sensibility for change. Henry Zondi, later elected as COSAW's new Natal chairperson, presented a more "mass struggle" approach with literature's heuristic role being prioritised at the expense of "aesthetic" content. Finally, Ari Sitas' "spur-of-the-moment" response (he hadn't been scheduled to speak) pointed to the response of South Africa's aesthetic critics to Sachs' paper, fearing that it would turn back the achievements of the last few years, unless Sachs' contribution was contextualised within the liberation struggle it belonged to.

The barrage of criticism and discussion that ensued was interesting, with two extreme positions being articulated and a variety of in-between ones.

On the one hand Pietermaritzburg's Piwe Mkhize argued the case for a total creative and artistic freedom; when the imagination was untrammeled it would find its place in social life. Our "glasnost" meant the end of an era of fear, authoritarianism, censorship and violence. At the same time it demanded of artists the courage of their convictions. Comrade Journal Ngidi from Port Shepstone criticised both Mkhize's "total freedom" and Ari Sitas' insistence on the right of ordinary people, the oppressed and the exploited to explore their individual talents. He argued for revolutionary discipline in the service of the struggle for freedom.

A variety of Northern Natal speakers took the floor in support of the second position, bringing forward their experiences of war-like conditions, violence and resistance. They felt that their situation made all cultural work "weapons" of unity, and this was a rhetorical debate.

Denver Mbhele from Port Shepstone swung the debate around by positing that our work should express our democratic principles and be above the situation. It was only in that way that it would have an uplifting role. Cele Sitole from the Umlazi Local reiterated the need for a literature of struggle and was disconcerted to hear the ANC was moving away from stated positions, which were very clear in the CASA (Culture in Another South Africa) conference.

Priya Narismulu from the Durban local pointed to the context of Sachs' paper, that it was an in-house paper which took the liberation struggle for granted, and the statements about "weapons" were tongue-in-cheek to provoke debate.

Nise Malange, COSAW's vice-president, described how to write about love was necessary; about making love in fear of your house being fire-bombed; about nature as it is seen from the township landscape. But this doesn't mean, she added, that our standards must be low. Pax Magwaza expanded on the theme of the images people are exposed to in their everyday life.

Mewa Ramgobin pursued the issue of standards and the issue of freedom of expression. He argued that where intellectual freedom is denied, a society begins to die. However, there had to be a balance. He argued against an unfettered and

unconditional freedom. Totalitarian and fascist ideas could not enjoy freedom of expression in a democratic culture - however artistic in their form. Some responsible censorship will always occur. In the case of standards, he argued it was difficult to assess what posterity will describe as great for our days.

As the issue of quality and standards was taken up by quite a few of the participants, Ari Sitas intervened by asking Madlinyoka Ntanzi, the oral poet, to orate 30 seconds of his poetry. He did. Then Sitas asked, what the criteria *were* to evaluate the work we had just heard.

Piwe Mkhize commended the performer and said it was in its historical and metaphorical power that such a poem can be judged, as well as in the response of the people. Mewa Ramgobin added that we have to strike a balance between universal and culture-specific statistics, in a step to active evaluation. Although sloganeering and propaganda shouldn't be confused with literature, slogans and propaganda were an important part of the liberatory movement. He added that literature undoubtedly had a role to uplift people, mobilise opinion and record history.

The discussion had to be cut short when Umlazi participants had to be home early, because barricades were already being set up in anticipation of a major attack.

Our writing as a weapon

Henry Zondi

Talk given at a COSAW Natal Regional AGM, May 1990

Comrades, having read Albie Sachs' paper on culture in conjunction with the ANC guidelines, one is tempted to simply agree or disagree. Yet Albie's paper raises serious arguments that need vigorous debating to arrive at a consensus. The paper urges us as cultural activists to visualise a new culture in a free democratic South Africa. In our deliberations we have to be guided by the Freedom Charter which is supplemented, so to speak, by our organisational policies and practices.

My input is however not aimed at glorifying Albie's paper or the ANC constitutional guidelines but to try and stimulate some discussion around the controversial issues. *Firstly*: There is a misconception that our cultural struggle is one of toyi-toying, one of slogans and the shouts of Amandla, with no serious discussion as regards the future. *Secondly*: That our culture is a culture of 'oppression' in the sense that we are not opening up to those who are outside of our structures. Ours is a culture of 'so-called progressives', the chosen few, whereas culture knows no boundaries. Rightly or wrongly, this is the criticism we are urged to address.

So far our activities have been and still are guided by our organisational policies. Our activities have been and still are guided by the practical situations on the ground. Our culture has a fundamental role to play in organising the unorganised, in building unity amongst the oppressed masses, in mobilising our people to take the struggle for liberation to higher levels, to

speak on behalf of the toiling masses. Our culture has been the sole voice of the voiceless majority.

Having said that, we need to assess and see whether we have achieved anything. It's true that we have been able to play a responsible role. The conditions under the State of Emergency have been prohibitive, stifling free expression - the media curbs as well as censorship on publications. Our youth has found a home in COSAW. However it will be suicidal for us to believe that we have come to the end of our cultural struggle. We need to advance and to look at the practical situation in the country. We need to discuss culture in a new democratic South Africa. The State organs still exist to promote their own culture. Ours is an alternative culture of the people and we must live up to the expectations. We must have a clear way forward.

It is true that we have to accept criticism and practise self-criticism. It is true that we have failed to win our enemies to our side. Our struggle is a process of working towards the transformation of the society as a whole. Admittedly in this process we have to guard against compromising our own policies. We have to guard against operating above the very masses we are trying to lead. We have to guard against duplicating the State's cultural web. Albie argues that "we must not be locked into cultural own affairs". This is true, we have to broaden our structures. We have to organise the rural areas, the white suburbs and the squatter settlements. In our structures we have to encourage open debates and be tolerant of others who are politically out of step. To those who cannot shout Amandla or our slogans. To those who cannot read and write and those who cannot speak the preferred 'English' language. The Freedom Charter says the doors of learning and culture shall be *opened.*

Mr Chairman, in conclusion I would like to summarise the following points.

1. We cannot reject the past - our future must be guided by our history and our experiences.
2. Our structures must be democratic - and we must engage ourselves in fair and thorough debates.
3. That in working the way forward we must be guided by our organisational policies and practical situations on the ground.

4. Finally that our task as organisers must extend to all unpenetrable areas, rural and white.

Viva COSAW Viva!

The Sachs debate: a philistine's response

Ari Sitas

Talk given at a meeting of the Natal Culture Congress, May 1990

Albie Sachs' paper has been welcomed by three different constituencies and has sent tremors through a fourth: firstly, it has pleased many mandarins who craft sharp lines, who have been affronted by the crackle and din outside the imperial hotel on defiance day. Sitting there, "flaming the terrapins", "flowering the rifles" or "gooseing the wayz", they felt rightfully irritated by slogans about "people's culture", or about literature being a *weapon*.

The fight with Calvin's predators, it is argued, generated a literature which was frayed at the elbow - writings which did not warrant the *distinction* of "literature". Since a fighter of significant intellectual standing like Sachs lent his voice to the discontent against all this rhetoric, the academy started breathing once more, at ease with itself; at ease with its forms and boundaries. If only the boundaries of depth and letters could be shifted somewhat so that a few black voices could join such white guards of standards, so much the better. But in the meantime . . . For me this reception committee is the least interesting.

Alongside the above, there have been welcome sighs from another constituency - for many years they have carried out a guerilla bookwar against the former: a more radical intelligentsia argued both for political art *and* standards. Not only could

their theory appreciate texts much better than the rest but they advocated criteria that pointed to the limitations of for example, socialist realism, the value of modernism and post-modernism and so on. This intellectual formation of the new left, based at universities, has had a significant influence in literary studies, but has had very little impact on the aesthetic models that have been generated by practitioners in the arts and literature.

Thirdly, Frank Meintjies' response represents another constituency's welcoming grunt - in his *Weekly Mail* article he identifies a series of writers, performers and artists, from Njabulo Ndebele to yours truly, who have for some time argued for internal criteria and standards *within* the grassroots' energy of oppositional and/or resistance formations. He claims in the course of his narrative that maybe the lack of cohesion in these active voices had to do with the fact that, "the time was not right - the state's mailed fist hung over the townships and thousands were experiencing detention. Perhaps it required members of the political leadership to give the cue". But as the political climate is changing we could find common ground with Sachs' provisos, and search for an expressivity conscious of quality. At the same time, Meintjies still insists on the validity of political and committed culture, and he reaffirms grassroots energy and creativity - an energy he had a crucial role in encouraging in the last few years.

Fourthly, amongst cultural workers who saw their contribution as a "weapon" in a variety of contexts, responses to Sachs' paper have been ambiguous and inchoate. Some such is the "Desk's" response reported by Phil Molefe in the *Weekly Mail* and similar has been the talk in all contexts I have been involved in. Many cultural workers are wondering whether their work has been "wrong", "banal" or "devoid of real content", and such re-examination can be very fruitful. Yet, Sachs' piece is frustrating because at no stage does it undertake a thorough critique of the main exponents of these "theories" and "practices". And, when exemplars are being used we read the names of Gwanga, Makeba, Masekela and Ibrahim, so that our local *isicathamiya* choir wonders about the validity of its craft.

Having been caught in-between the third and the fourth responses around me, and having been stimulated by both

sighs and confusion, I need to enter the fray in defence of some of our frayed elbows.

Sachs' worries are very well-founded: the quality of much revolutionary art has been poor; the functionalism of t-shirt designs and posters lacked the playfulness of the imagination; the drab slogans and half-baked lines created on many occasions an emotional impasse; to defend these for their necessity at a specific historic moment must not be confused with a defence of craft.

Nevertheless, he is treading a difficult path when he decries the presence of oppression in its ugliness through people's works: "our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture", in which "everything is obsessed with the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed". However provocative and accurate, he is also being simplistic: indeed, it is through the struggle to comprehend this ugliness, this grief, that hope and more complex emotions could be articulated.

For example, I cannot see how Sfiso Mkame's letters to mother, to god, to the children, those ugly encyclopaedias of evil, painted in envelope-like frames next to each other, making up an imposing composition, which force a face to face confrontation of ugliness, can be forgotten, downplayed or repressed. I, personally might find his work totally convincing; alongside it, I might find Zylla's graphics and drawings disturbing, significant but forced; I might find Kentridge's drawings distant and alien the minute he brings the devastation of necklaces and violence in the foreground of his work; I might gasp at the sight of the documentary photographs contained in the "Broken Barricades" exhibition; in all cases what I cannot deny is the seriousness and exemplary status of their work, despite my criticisms. Furthermore, the lines about grief and hope embodied in the dozens of funerary lines that are emitted from our poets cannot be silenced. Such works are very *much*, "about us and the new consciousness we are developing".

Most commentators on cultural affairs have strange relationships to the grassroots energy that has engulfed us through oral modes and performance-genres. Here, in this crackle and din, the fixity of a canvas, a line on a page, a record that can be replayed, gets unhinged to roll over into a continuum of sound

and gesture - usually away from the critics' senses (therefore distant and inaccessible). My work in these performance contexts leads me to claim, to deaf ears usually too, that major formal innovations are being achieved in poetry, choirwork, dance and the theatre arts; these innovations, I add, are also affecting scripts whilst at the same time these innovators are learning from scribes in exciting new ways; these innovations, I keep on repeating, have been brought about *by* the coincidence of creativity and social mobilization.

In Natal, like in many other places, grassroots creators have known how fragile their bodies were and how they got broken in gaol; how they got pierced real easy by spears; how they got shattered real easy in the townships and stunted by the muck we eat and breathe - they knew all along that their only "aesthetic weapons" have been their bodies and what their brains remembered or remade into stories; through these, a physical, grotesque, humorous, emotional, extreme, theatre of sound and gesture emerged whose zest and dynamism captivates and surprises. The insistence on quality without a careful examination of the internal criteria that make up such works is regrettable.

All the more regrettable because "taste judgements", according to the French sociologist Bourdieu, are a form of violence perpetrated by the strong on the weak. The power to *make* the rules of "taste" or "quality" turns into hegemony once the incumbents become convinced of their own failings; once they internalise negative self-images congruent with the assertions of those who assess them. And those who try and mend their ways to learn the rules and school themselves under the direction of the rule-makers, as we know, find their forms of speech and mannerism, their lives and feelings, unsuited and unassimilable. Our history is littered with examples: the way Dhlomo was treated and bullied; the way a liberal patronage offended the Bikos, Gwalas, and Lekhotas; the way later Ravan Press's and Black Consciousness dominance treated the rest, and so on, down the years.

Nevertheless, we must all concur with Sachs when he pleads: "Let us write better poems, let us make better films . . . ". We must take up the challenge, echo the sentiment and ask our-

selves *how*. There will be a tendency among us who have not been singled-out especially by Sachs' critique, to avoid discussing the strength of our dreams, sure of ourselves, convinced that the arrows aimed elsewhere. But such an invitation to change our aesthetic practices can be read also as a statement pregnant with middle-class voluntarism.

On this we need to digress briefly: we need to move from the surface to a more substantive analysis. We know that artists abstract in their own peculiar way from a complex structure of impulses - impulses that are pressing onto the core of their imagination. Such impulses originate from apprenticeships under other creators, from direct experience, from schooling, from in short, a whole range of stimuli that affect our consciousness *and* in many cases our "bio-structure", our nerve-cells creating also unconscious blockages which prohibit expressivity of many kinds.

For example, my class, my status, my colour, has much to do with what I draw from to compose my lines, whether it would be Rimbaud, Celan, Neruda, Césaire, Dikobe, Bachman or Qabula. The way I relate to aesthetic elites and, depending on my aesthetic capacities or my ability, to my craft, I could transform these stimuli to something that approximates works of art. I know from my educational range, I *could* try to change my aesthetic vocabulary.

But apart from these impulses and aesthetic models I utilise I produce under specific *conditions* of creativity that are constrained by my working day, perhaps my family commitments, perhaps my ability to write under narcotic substances and so on. Most grassroots creators though are creating under different conditions and hardships. It is precisely *this* that shifts the focus from creativity to cultural work: we have come to know that unless conditions for creativity are transformed there is no way that such aesthetic freedom can be entertained. That is why in the labour movement through the COSATU locals, through projects like the Culture and Working Life Project, and increasingly through COSAW and many more, we have been struggling to change these conditions, in a nutshell: as cultural workers. We had to and will have to, despite the new climate

that Meintjies describes, struggle for these transformations alongside our creative output.

It was this predicament that sometimes made us impatient with the aesthetic concerns of creative people and where the tone of "glasnost" in Sachs' paper is a sound reproach that would allow us to move forward and preserve the diversity of popular culture and its manifestations alongside the individual work of art. It is also a reminder that we should seek unity and not uniformity, and that we should be proud about the cultural diversity of our people. This would imply, and Sachs states, that true leadership from the top to the bottom of progressive cultural organisations should be non-hegemonic: rather, a facilitating leadership must emerge that encourages people to perform well or better, cogniscent of the dynamics and aesthetic standards of their craft. But also a principled leadership, that seeks transformation of conditions of cultural production and that seeks to support creators in all their struggles.

In all this, we have an advantage, because as of yet nobody has dared to stand up and say - "there is only *one* correct way to write or perform and this *one* way is both scientifically and politically sound"; and, no-one has added that, "those who do not write that way, are reactionaries, philistines, bourgeois, marginals, enemies". At least, I hope no-one has; at least I know in Natal no-one has.

Instead, we have enjoyed a lot of *diversity* in writing and performing styles. In our events migrant workers lament their conditions in a variety of tongues, next to novelists struggling with their commas; youth sloganising next to lyrical poets; saints and sinners trying to boogie.

We have been trained to appreciate Sfiso Mkame's paintings, full of awesome images, but we have also learnt to appreciate the eclectic naîveté of a decorator like Zungu. We have listened to the lines of Qabula but also to the lines of Mlungisi Mkhize, and the differences are enormous. This has been one of our strengths.

We realised that despite our differences there were common sensibilities from the mine and farm to the intellectual's office. From all quarters an attempt was made to come to terms with our experience of a South Africa in turmoil; moving towards a

revolutionary *new* future. And we knew, to quote Qabula, that "the dying donkey/still kicked final hard blows".

In this context the best work developed around five principles (despite the way they were presented):

a) It was marked by a principle of hope, of redemption, of freedom.
b) It was haunted by the spectre of death - it was a funerary craft full of obituaries and sounds of transcendence.
c) It asserted defiance and in its rhythms and gestures *it* was defiant.
d) It assumed a total familiarity with the people, but tried to reach them in unfamiliar ways.
e) It was self-critical.

Furthermore, within our organisations we have also witnessed many creative struggles by individuals, by women, by collectives, by township youth and by workers.

We have worked with individuals who are searching to find themselves, to discover a new identity beyond the roles society has imposed on them. People who are seeking to imprint their creativity on the march of time by seeking recognition as something *more* than a cog in the social machinery of power.

There is also the struggle of individual women to break out of their roles. As Nise Malange stated, "Women were like shadows only to be heard during the night, whispering their stories to the children . . . or as objects who are to be ululating when the praise poets praised the chiefs and the izinduna"; these women "lost in the vast buildings" at night polishing floors, are beginning to strut out and to struggle to define their own identity.

We also find in our midst the struggle of groups, however defined, who are demanding recognition and a place for reconquering the dignity denied them by years of segregationism and domination. Groups, for example, like the editorial collective of the Zulu journal *Injula*, made up of shop-stewards, grassroots and scholarly intellectuals, who were convinced that there was something of value in the Zulu language and their history to be preserved and be made a central concern for liberation politics. Similar sentiments are echoed by Mpondo women streetcleaners, who are trying to connect with broader

processes through their local traditions, poems, gestures and songs.

There are also in our organizations the voices of militant youth, of workers, demanding in a multitude of styles and voices a new South Africa, both democratic and socialist. Who once again, despite the derision and mocking by elites are trying to articulate very complex emotions through whatever means they have at their disposal.

COSAW, the Theatre Alliance of Natal, musicians and photographers' associations, etc. are organisations made up of all these struggles, their noises and aspirations. It is our duty to create the space and the possibilities for their fulfillment. In encouraging unity *in* diversity, in demanding a total transformation of society so people can control their creative potential, in believing that writers and artists *can* make a difference, we might be able to live different and liberated lives.

Albie Sachs must not worry: Culture and Working Life Project's response

Nise Malange, Pax Magwaza, Mathabo Moloi, Alfred Qabula, Lanly Simpson and others

Talk given at a seminar at the Centre of Industrial and Labour Studies, Natal, in May 1990

Albie Sachs must not worry: we do make love sometimes *and* we have said on occasion that culture is a weapon in our struggle. But, what we understand by 'struggle' and what political activists understand by 'struggle' is often not the same.

We see struggle as *part* of us, part of our everything - you wake up in the morning and it starts *coming* to you, if it has let you sleep at all, it is about surviving, being resilient, living, singing *and* fighting. We always felt that as artists we had to try and express what was inside of us, what we felt, and depict both the inside and the outside of our lives. And, as a project related to black workers, women and youth, to create with what we have, despite the conditions around us.

We were always worried about giving recipes to people; and we felt uneasy about people who tell others that their work was not good enough because it did not show 'our struggles'.

But we were 'guilty' at another level of two impositions: firstly, we felt that some pieces of work were promoting values that we could *not* support, like for example writings and novels that promoted traditional authoritarianism and capitalism on the farms. Instead of being critical, we could have said that the

way relationships were depicted was interesting, and turned a blind eye and patted such writers on the back. But our criticism was never meant to imply that such authors did not have enough 'Viva Mandela' slogans. Later, we shall show how *principled criticism* is necessary in our struggle for a new society. Secondly, we are guilty of having made available and encouraged people to enjoy cultural forms in all gatherings - from the small trade union office to the stadiums. In such contexts, cultural workers were used to strengthen people's solidarity, to make people think and also to entertain. We have used expression and creativity as an instrument by making it part and parcel of public political life.

But our work at mass gatherings has not stopped; there were and are more components to it.

1. We always understand our work to be part and parcel of a *liberation* struggle - of freeing ourselves, as natural and sensual beings, from the exploitation and oppression around us. In this sense our work has been a 'weapon'.

2. Apart from participating 'in' the struggle, our work has been encouraging workers and all ordinary people to develop all their natural talents and inclinations; to speak of love and nature; to speak of ugliness; to appreciate drawings like Sfiso's *Have you seen the moon?*; to develop personal themes about loss; to follow the meaning of the 'personal in political'; to listen to poems like Qabula's *Sthandwa* with its love and political poetic themes; to talk of birds, suns and nature.

3. The work undertaken by us is democratic in nature; it insists on the participation of more and more people in the exploration of their talents; to open themselves up for and through creativity. And, for those with aspirations caught in factories and in the unemployment queues, in the kitchens and at home, opportunities have been created to compose, to write and share with others. We have been struggling to develop *people*, not to tell them what to do, not just to upgrade their skills as experts, or bosses or specialists. Rather to inform them of possibilities, to encourage them *in* their creativity and to affirm that their experiences were valid.

4. We insisted that our effort was based on principles of *participatory education* where people had to learn to unify

through diversity - for example when the big man from the North, Zungu, the political poet, witnessed our Mayday festival he was pleasantly challenged; witnessing the diversity of styles coming from Natal's working class communities - from break/pantsula dancing to indlamu/ingoma; witnessing each group with its own special cultural meanings and convictions about themselves and others, one had to accept the legitimacy of many forms and styles. 'Ethnic' attire and symbols are not about *segregation, apartheid*, they are also a source of strength - Iscor workers' dances can co-exist with Mpondo women's performances.

5. We agree with Sachs when he says that, "the power of art lies in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden meanings"; through older people we are very well aware that our 'traditional' forms, from dance to poetry, from performance to story telling, were all about contradiction, adversity, conflicts and hidden meanings. We also know that many of our works fall far short of that, but also, many don't.

The insurrection of 1984-6 and the violence thereafter has had both negative and positive effects on grassroots creativity. Of serious negative implications has been the lack of self-criticism in grassroots creativity. But, part of the problem *was* with the nature of many political leaders' understanding of the relationship between cultural work and politics. Any criticism could be 'labelled' as 'anti-', any 'false step' could cause marginalization. Any knowledge of the nature of conflict in the townships, any 'label' or false step' was difficult to live with. Also, many leaders saw cultural workers as groupings that were to fit into the gaps of political activity or to become 'adverts' for the latest campaign. Cultural workers had to use slogans to mobilise *and* to demobilise, to fight but also to call for peace; to accuse and defend.

Furthermore, the emergent alternative media constructed models that had to be followed 'for' the struggle. They focused only on certain aspects of creativity, encouraged advert-slogans, celebrated propaganda, and then changed their mind only when the leaderships changed their minds. And in them many cultural workers *had* to follow the fashions of the day if they were to gain any exposure or recognition: fashions about *what* to say,

how to say it, how to name your children and so on, to develop new revolutionary styles.

The new "revolutionary style" was partly a product of the *extreme* conditions which we live through in the townships and partly a media construction. Its effect was to downplay the 'affairs of the heart'. But in so doing, it allowed bubblegum music and TV to define 'love', 'womanhood' and 'manhood', and to create its own problems. The new style which made people to become 'perfect struggle machines', coupled with hate and anger, created performances that were of suspect value.

This "revolutionary style", crucial to younger people, had at the same time remarkable features also; it created meaningful grassroots solidarities, co-operation, total commitment to the importance of creativity, self-sacrifice for community betterment, and in the trade unions discipline and innovation.

Despite the ugliness, the violence and fear, grassroots creators continued to laugh and smile through their plays, from Dambuza to Empangeni and from Durban to Newcastle. Workers and youth, despite the state of emergency and with what they had at their disposal, created vibrant performances that were mindful of the pain that affected their families, the communities and their factories. From plays like *Qonda* to a play like *Pitymaritzburg* a human face full of defiance shines through.

The issue of quality is important - what we need to be asking ourselves is the following - will these times we are living through be *remembered* through our work? Will our lines, like Neto's, make Luanda come alive again? Will 1984-6 be remembered better, its tensions shown clearer, its darkness illuminated through our plays? Or, will our creative products be surface statements that need to be understood as poor products of the time? We feel that there are enough of both examples around this and our task is to evaluate all the time our work with honesty and realism.

The issue of "quality" and "standards" is political in another sense: it is a method through which people are excluded by those priests of culture who happen to control the church. And many churches as we know get their coherence by denouncing those evildoers, those sinners outside. We prefer inclusive con-

gregations which, without abandoning rigour or standards, bring everyone together, congregations whose doors are open.

It is on such inclusive bases, that culture can be evaluated, debated, improved and also gain in substance so that it can form a component of progressive policy after apartheid. On this basis real unity can be discussed and problems like the language question in South Africa can be solved. Because in the final instance it is creative people who should be deciding on their creative futures.

But we are in a process of immense transformation and Sachs' proposition for a "non-hegemonic leadership" is exciting but difficult because it presupposes a society of broad consensus. We will argue instead that what we firstly need is the platform and the right for *principled criticism* of creative work at all levels of society. This implies that we will have to enter the fray of discussion and debate to make principles, our principles perhaps, acceptable, hegemonic.

Secondly, when confronted with works which are insulting to constituencies, which are degrading and full of lies, derogatory about the poor and the exploited, and so on, what we would have to base ourselves in is two rights and a prohibition. The right of the creator to express himself or herself: the right of the communities and groups to boycott creators who are seen to be insulting and the freedom to mobilise for it: and the prohibition that any mobilisation or any group can violently impose its will.

Until the creation of peace and free political life in our cities, the squatter camps and countryside, we cannot but accept the inevitability of competing hegemonic projects *and* the necessity to change violent behaviour into structured criticism, discussion and protest. When we make plays against the death penalty we are serious: we value life, life's productive and creative powers, but we need to move from the current horror of violence and militarisation in Natal to a peaceful society.

A policy of non-hegemonic leadership which encourages freedom of expression is desirable but it would only encompass at the moment an articulate and already tolerant creative elite primarily drawn from the middle classes.

Our vocation and craft

Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo

Translation of a Zulu poem in the author's new collection, Umzila, *to be published in 1990*

I am
A frail wanderer
A singing bird
estranged from its lineage
cast away from its nature in solitude
A bird screaming out visions and omens -
My art ploughing the skies warning.

(Not a killer bird
not a scavenger)

Just a bird
cast in a vacuum
its creativity isolated
Observing corpses and shrieking
Observing hope and singing that
"Hm, hm, hey!"
the landscapes scarred by structures of gloom.
Nature becomes invisible
through the naked eye,
and a great blurring of outlines
as mighty clouds obscure my vision
Mighty winds destroy my bearings

A frail wanderer
a singing bird
a bird screaming out visions and omens
ploughing the skies warning.

Hm, hm, hey!
People's dignity
bled on the killing-fields
Destroyed by other human hands
countries deprived of their creative power
through somebody's hand using the other hands
which use the other hands for the job

Hm, hm, hey!
and screams of those degraded
and moan and roar of all those exploited
inspires works of the brain and scholarship
Instead hands touching hands
stopping hands from using others
when people's blood is shed
when power and right are stolen
when persecution is accelerated
more research and dissertations are crafted
and one hears of investments, plans and technology.

If I was a lion
I would turn the people's moan into a roar
to tremble the hunters' bones to powder
so that their fearsome effigies collapse
if I was a crocodile
I would have swallowed and gulped the last liquid drop
water out of the rivers and lakes and wells that hold the fuel
to block once and for all their modern devices
that crush workers in the factories and mines.

But in all this world of humans
I am a wanderer, a frail bird
a creature
a people's bird

a singing bird.
A bird screaming out visions and omens
which prods the leaders to lead
which makes courageous songs
and people to demand their slice of rights
ploughing the skies

I see paths but do not walk them
I see the clearings
and I counsel the sojourners
and I alert the people
the way to trail their ways to go
Hm, hm, hey!

The cultural boycott and Albie Sachs' paper

Transvaal Interim Cultural Desk

Internal discussion document, afterwards published in the New African *and the* Weekly Mail

We agree with the sentiment expressed in a discussion paper by Albie Sachs, 'Preparing ourselves for freedom', that our aim is leadership and not control. We therefore state clearly that it is not our job to prescribe to artists and cultural workers how they should contribute to our struggle and what the nature and content of their work should be; it is for them to come up with their own creative responses to our situation.

We do not think, however, that seeing culture as a weapon of struggle is 'wrong', 'banal' or 'devoid of real content'. Building an alternative, truly non-racial culture is, we believe, one of the best ways to fight apartheid. By this one does not mean a culture of mere agit-prop that is political in a very narrow sense, however. It should give expression to the whole range of human emotions and experience, it should capture the fullness and contribute to the richness of the type of existence with which we wish to replace apartheid and enhance the quality of our life.

Though we do not wish to prescribe how, it is our right and duty to challenge all cultural workers to contribute towards the struggle against apartheid in whatever way they may be best equipped.

We challenge cultural workers to root themselves in the democratic movement so that their creative responses to life

will be informed by an understanding and experience of the struggle. We thereby reiterate the view of the Gaberone and CASA (Culture in Another South Africa) conferences on culture that one is first part of the struggle and then a cultural worker.

We also challenge cultural workers to contribute to the discussion and theory of culture that could help us understand what a non-racial culture could be, and how to address the imbalances to cultural expression brought about by apartheid. We call on them to contribute towards this by sharing their skills.

We pose these challenges mindful of the fact that creativity does not follow rules, that each cultural worker must find a way of contributing that is true to him or herself, and that different and varied creative responses are to be valued as contributing to the richness of the culture that we wish to create.

It is against this background that we wish to address the cultural boycott. We wish to emphasise that the cultural boycott is a selective boycott, aimed at helping to build a progressive culture as an alternative to the culture of apartheid that we wish to isolate. As with the rest of the struggle, there is an open invitation to all to participate.

Those who are with us, who are part of anti-apartheid structures, who contribute to our forums, or who are known to further our cause through their art or in any other way - all our members, friends and allies - should be able to benefit from international exchange and will have nothing to fear of the cultural boycott.

There will be those opportunists who will want our blessing merely to be exempted from the international cultural boycott in order to make money and careers overseas. To this we say that it is not our job to act as some kind of censorship board to okay works by artists and producers that have no links with the struggle.

Let us repeat that we do not demand that all art should be 'political' in a very narrow sense of the word - we wish art to express all aspects of humanity that will make up a non-racial way of life. Let us repeat also that it is not only through art that cultural workers can contribute to the struggle.

Cultural workers must decide for themselves where they stand politically and how they express it, be it through their art or any other way they see fit. All those who have shown that they support us, we will support.

Those who choose rather to contribute to the maintenance of apartheid, through the content of their work or in any other way, those we will counter with all means at our disposal, including the cultural boycott.

Report of COSAW Transvaal regional general meeting, April 21, 1990

Lance Nawa

When Albie Sachs' paper, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom", was first published in South Africa, academics and cultural workers scurried for their pens to comment on it. From COSAW Transvaal, Frank Meintjies responded personally through an article run by the *Weekly Mail*. With a flair of sophistication and subtleness he almost put the paper in a closet. He wrote: "Much of what [Sachs] says echoes what several leading cultural workers have been advocating for some time". Respectable names like Nadine Gordimer, Njabulo Ndebele, Mi Hlatshwayo and Mzwakhe Mbuli were promptly cited.

Francis Faller supported Meintjies, also through the *Weekly Mail*. While acknowledging the genuineness of Sachs' view, Faller still held that "let's not deny the platform poet, the detonator of mass response, his important cultural task. But let's not forget what he is trying to do: generate united (not to mince words, uniform) resistance to political oppression, or uniform acclamation of a political hero."

The Transvaal Cultural Desk saw red. It could not come to grips with the somersaulting of a comrade who once (as mentioned in his paper) went along with the idea that the struggle should have "drama missiles or rocket launched poems, guitar grenades and saxophone bazookas".

Academics, on the other hand, adopted a "we told you" attitude at the risk of becoming verbose. But the most interest-

ing insight into the scenario came from grassroots writers who had not even laid their hands on this thorny paper. They had gathered for a COSAW Transvaal regional general meeting on April 21 in Johannesburg.

After a briefing on the paper by the chairperson, Meintjies, they chewed the topic like old hands in cultural studies. Their attitude, including that of three well-prepared panelists, Orenna Krut, Lesego Rampolokeng and Bheki Maseko, seemed to be almost the repetition of Sachs' points, though in different wording.

In her attempt to harmonise the afore-mentioned conflicting viewpoints, Krut, a COSAW Transvaal Executive Committee member, said that Sachs was not at all wrong in expressing this view, but rather envisaged or tried to propagate a cultural expression beyond just polemics. He saw a narrow approach (political that is) to culture as one that impoverishes art and does not equip South Africans with a cultural imagination suitable for a new (political) dispensation. "In his paper, Albie Sachs argues that our insistence that culture is a weapon of the struggle is not wrong, but has been harmful to us," said Krut. She cited the harm as the alienation of some potential writers and cultural workers from many South African cultural organisations. These people feel, she said, that they do not have a place within cultural structures because it appears to them that only politically-laden art work is given top priority at the expense of greater art, which accommodates neutral concepts like love and nature.

Rampolokeng saw poetic creativity as a bone of contention rather than contents or subjects as Sachs is seemingly calling for. He said even those neutral idioms like love can attain subtle political flavour or status, without being blatant propaganda when laced with encapsulating creative metaphors. A demonstration was given to the laughter of the house: "I do make love, comrades," he revealed, "but the love I make is of babies born in prisons not hospitals: if they are, it is on top of other people [double-deck beds implied] because of shortage of beds. Augustinho Neto made love and Angola was conceived."

He went on to step on a precipice by suggesting that writers should not be afraid of using any style or form available to them,

even if it is at times Western orientated. Such a scenario ensures the seizing of language from oppressors with the effect of revolutionising and throwing it back at them as ammunition, said the poet from Orlando. Argument poeticised:

I am a freedom fighter
for I fire with a typewriter.
(Rampolokeng)

Maseko, an old guard whose writing of short stories solicits consistent attention from highly intellectual cultural workers such as Njabulo Ndebele, called for a literature that is timeless. He urged cultural workers to produce pieces that will remain immortal in people's minds: stories which will compel people to want to share with others; stories with moral didactic function. One way of achieving this, he noted, is to confront our elders by asking them to tell us stories before they pass away. To put words in Maseko's mouth: cultural workers should adopt the Mozambican slogan, "Our [elderly] people are our libraries".

Some defensive positions were, of course, taken during the discussion. Concerned about what effect the absence of politics in culture can have on the militancy of workers, one COSAW member rejected the point that slogans should not be used in literature as suggested by Sachs, at least via Krut. The cultural worker in question saw slogans as arming workers with a language which terrifies bosses on factory floors and creates a feeling of solidarity with other workers from different plants.

Nonetheless, a more positive defence of the state of affairs was given through the whole meeting. As one COSAW member said, "Culture as a weapon of the struggle should be used broadly to incorporate other things which are not necessarily political". Others felt one should try and sketch reasons for the discourse.

Uniformity and the preoccupation with the need to belong to a political movement were seen as having a hand in the stagnation of art. "It is today difficult to identify a writer's work without looking at his/her name because our work sounds all the same. We all want to be little Mzwakhes," lamented a poet, named simply 'Zorro', from COSAW Soutpansberg local.

Said another member of the audience: "Our writing came to this stagnating stage partly because of the influence publishers

have on writers, especially aspiring young ones with a strong sense of the need to belong. These writers are forced to start off with political pieces because they are made to believe that this guarantees publication and thus exposure to a political movement to which they wish to belong."

Meintjies cast a more global view when he said Sachs wrote the paper as an attempt to guide cultural workers through the transitional phase the country is in. In the past writers often used metaphors of protest and reaction because they saw, or rather were, victims of apartheid, he said. But today, even still tomorrow, these writers will no longer be victims but controllers of their own fate. Since they will be or are now expected to formulate new concepts for the new dispensation, they must be pro-active in their approach to art. This new cultural imagination will help the South African people to venture into the new society with certainty and not apologies, Meintjies observed.

Albie Sachs' paper: What issues does it raise for COSAW?

Orenna Krut

Paper delivered at COSAW Transvaal regional general meeting, 21 April 1990

In his paper Albie Sachs argues that our insistence that "culture is a weapon of struggle" is not wrong, but it has been harmful. That is because comrades have seen poetry and fiction as a place for slogans. Slogans have become fashionable. And as long as you've said the right slogans in your poem, everyone else approves of your work even if it's boring, badly written and completely unoriginal.

So Sachs suggests we need to think again about writing being good, interesting, original, creative, provocative, inspiring . . .

But he also goes on to link what we as the cultural movement produce to how we organise. He says that because we approve of bad poetry with the right political message, and ignore subjects like love or the environment, we have begun to impose a rigidness on to the members of the cultural movement. Thus through limiting what we write about and how we write, we have closed off our organisations. We have perhaps lost the people who want to write about other sorts of things.

Sachs uses the example of discussion on the ANC Constitutional Guidelines. He writes: "The method is the message; the open debate the NEC wants on the Guidelines corresponds to the open society the Guidelines speak about." So if we, as COSAW, want an open society, we need to have open debate

about culture and be open to stories about, for example, "My first girlfriend". If we want a democratic society, we need to ensure our organisations are really for the people, not just for a few elite members who understand the right "line". Our organisation should be a home for many, not just the already converted. We should remember that other writers can learn from us and we can learn from them.

So in order to keep our organisations truly mass-based, and to ensure we don't get stuck in boring slogan-writing, we should avoid being censors who tell people what to write and how to write it. Nor should we censor ourselves - and feel that only some things are worth writing about. Maybe some of us write different kinds of poems, but we only publish and read out the ones that seem "right" and we hide our love poems in our drawers. Perhaps this is a central question COSAW needs to talk about - what can we write about? Or maybe the question can be posed in another way - is there anything we can't write about?

COSAW has never aimed to censor. But what we probably have done, even without knowing it, is created a culture of what is acceptable. Through the workshops we run and the work we publish, we are giving people a message about how we see culture. When we stand up in our meetings and read out what we have written, do we all sound the same? Can we tell the difference between one comrade's poem and another? The answers to these questions will tell us whether we encourage debate and variety, or whether we encourage uniformity.

Some people would argue that it is important to popularise slogans and campaigns and to inspire people politically through what we write. We are not neutral as writers, they say. We have to choose a side. Well, that's certainly true. But let's look more closely at what we mean by being *progressive* as a writers' organisation.

The writings of politically oppressed groupings are always suppressed. The heritage of black writing in South Africa was hidden for many years. Few people would publish writing by black people, and academics ignored it and studied the literature of Europe instead. The same has happened internationally with women's writing. When we think back on who we

were taught are the world's great writers, they're white and they're men. So in a way, encouraging and publishing the writing of historically oppressed groups is itself a political act. It is an attack on a culture which has sought to hide and denigrate these works. And this is a very important part of what COSAW does.

The Transvaal AGM last year, with its theme of "Our Cultural Heritage", aimed to kill the myth of literature being the preserve mainly of white males from Europe and America. It also challenged the idea that literature is always written. And through our workshops, we learn the skills that government education never taught, and we encourage new voices that might otherwise not be heard.

But that doesn't mean that we become totally uncritical. We can't publish anything written by a member of an oppressed group. The content of what someone writes can be progressive, conservative or maybe neutral, good or bad, no matter what class, race or sex the writer comes from. So what writing do we encourage and what writing, if any, do we censor?

The Transvaal Publications Committee has come up against this problem in a very concrete way. Most of the writing we looked at when selecting for the first *Ingolovane* was more or less the same - hundreds of poems full of slogans we believed in, but that we'd heard many times in speeches, songs, articles and other people's poems. There were also some works about political issues that were very beautiful and original. Then there were some which spoke about Azania. COSAW has never affiliated to the UDF or any other political grouping, but we have clearly identified ourselves with the MDM - so we asked ourselves, can we publish work that obviously expresses a different political position? And finally we had material that wasn't overtly political at all.

We had long discussions about how we were to choose. Eventually we decided that the only thing we were prepared to censor was racism or sexism. We weren't prepared to censor a poem that talked about Azania, as long as it had some literary merit. We weren't prepared to exclude the slogans, but we did have to choose only a few to prevent the journal from being repetitive and boring. And we weren't prepared to censor the

poems that were about love or children or sex, because all those things are part of people's lives and belong in our culture.

When the Publications Committee reads the work submitted to *Ingolovane*, we look for things which are interesting and original. We look for things which make us think, or which we enjoy, or which are well expressed, or which arouse emotions in us, or which make us look at old issues in a new way. This is what we consider good writing.

What does this approach mean for COSAW? It means that we regard culture as a place of openness, debate, variety and experimentation and not a place of control and rigidness. It means we don't tell others or ourselves what to write and what not to write. It means we encourage people to express themselves however they want to. It means we acknowledge in our writing that despite oppression, we are all complex people with rich and varied lives. And if we choose to write about struggle issues it is because we want to, not because we feel we have to. And when we do write about struggle issues, we try to present them in a new way which will challenge people and make them think in new ways. Above all, we will not become complacent that as long as we are condemning our oppressors or glorifying our leaders and organisations, our writing is good.

Our safety net is that we will not encourage or publish anything which is harmful to other people as human beings or compromises our ideals - and that includes writing which is racist, sexist or promotes the individuals or groups which stand for racism or sexism.

This is the challenge that Sachs' paper implies for COSAW and for other groups in the cultural sector. I believe we need to take up this challenge if we are to grow and develop. An open society requires openness among organisations of the people. A democratic society requires people and organisations who believe in people's right to say what they believe, as long as they don't promote hatred or oppression among people. A society in which the doors of learning and culture are opened requires cultural organisations who open their own doors - not just a crack and not just for a chosen few, but to the people at large.

New thinking - the broader political context

Frank Meintjies

Talk given at the COSAW Transvaal regional general meeting, 21 April 1990

The present discussion on the direction of progressive culture grows very pertinently out of the broader political context. The present is pregnant with new challenges and possibilities which call for new thinking. In broad outline the shift (which is primarily a shift in emphasis) can be viewed as follows:

Reactive	Proactive
Oppositional	Liberatory
Protest	Formulating clear alternatives/ demands
Rhetoric	Operationalising the vision
Ungovernability	Preparing for governability

In the present period, not only do we need to come forward with policy formulations, we also need answers about how we are going to implement them. Do we have the skills, the resources and the democratic infrastructure? By resources, we should be referring to more than just material resources and people. We should also be thinking about a mindset, a certain boldness and self-confidence that is needed for us to pull together to govern ourselves and to assume responsibility for generation and distribution of wealth. This depends on how far we have

gone to lay foundations of practical experience, creativity, openness, and ability to self-reflect, social consciousness.

Albie Sachs' recent bold intervention has become important because it is directing to cultural workers the question that other sectors are asking: how do we make the jump that is required to move forward decisively in the unfolding phase? In the protest period, much of our writing, especially our poetry, became the newspapers of the struggle, taking forward campaigns, popularising organisational formations, celebrating leaders who were in constant battle against repression. Indeed some of our weaker poems looked no different to a sentence or two from a campaign pamphlet - the only difference being that pieces of the sentence were set on different lines. Other art forms also took an activist stance, with theatre at times giving a curious priority to mobilizing overseas opinion against apartheid.

Sweeping value judgements of the nature of past progressive cultural work itself becomes rhetorical and unhelpful. Such denunciations undermine what has been a significant offensive against apartheid culture. They also don't see that political engagement was part of an important self-liberation process (now more widely generated by the mass political organisation). By lashing out, by spurning self-indulgence, by reaching out for something larger than themselves many artists found that human affirmation which in turn energised them for more creative action.

However, it cannot be gainsaid that taking forward the progressive thrust in culture is a far more complex project today. Through struggle we have opened up the space to begin restoring what has been eaten away, to start mending the torn fabric of our lives, to rebuild what has been broken and fragmented.

Looking at the imperative of transformation, cultural workers can well ask: Have the new, more human values that should supercede the old been sufficiently explored, recognised, discussed and promoted? If cultural workers want to assist in this process they do so best, it seems to me, by building out of what is among our people, what is "funny", "curious", witty and even ambiguous and contradictory, in Sachs' words, among our people. This is because "cultural worker" implies that through

our work we explore and illuminate aspects of the way we live, the practices and traditions. The message appears to be that our poems and stories should not merely dash down the streets, as they often do, snapping the casspirs and troops and the matchbox sizes of our houses; they should enter the shebeens and the homes and the playing fields of children. Like Paulo Freire says, the challenge is to start from our own experiences, who we are, what we can be, in the striving for a greater humanness and to break out of what Njabulo Ndebele refers to as an "ethos of oppression".

The discussions we are having in COSAW are part of the process of reorientation and strategic re-evaluation which will help to propel us beyond formal changes to real transformation; to fulfillment of our immense potential. Albie Sachs' paper - which seems deliberately provocative - has provided a spark that has set alight wider debate and reflection among cultural workers.

To summarise our discussions on Albie Sachs' paper: we have said yes to the following about the content of literature:

- politics, but less sloganeering;
- politics, but also broader human experiences and exploration of new values;
- creativity, defined partly as originality, a break with uniformity, attention to technique, probing under the surface.

Culture in South Africa: the challenge of transformation

Junaid Ahmed

Talk given as part of a panel discussion organised by the Progressive Arts Project, held at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg on 2 June 1990

The debate engendered by Albie Sachs on the role of culture has been received by some with extreme glee - whilst others react cautiously and with some trepidation. Liberals vociferously reaffirm their position - that they were right all along and that art must be divorced from politics. The paper has caused some consternation within the mass based progressive movement, where cultural workers (as Ari Sitas puts it) are worried that their work has been banal or even devoid of content.

Whatever the reaction, there is one inescapable fact: that the Sachs paper has, and perhaps timeously so, engendered, encouraged and stimulated the kind of debate about the role of culture that is so necessary during the phase of transformation in our country.

I will discuss some points arising out of the Sachs paper, and then address what I regard as the most crucial task facing all cultural practitioners - the challenge of transformation in our cultural activity.

The first problem is that, so far, responses to the paper have hung primarily on two phrases:

- members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle;
- white is beautiful.

With regard to the first issue, the following must be noted:

- The weapon created out of culture is a process which negates oppression, which isolates, and finally prepares the death of the culture of apartheid - basically the culture of the people trying to eradicate the hegemonic culture of power.
- Culture as a weapon of struggle has made a significant contribution to our vocabulary, and has located many indigenous languages which would have been static in tradition within revolution, change and the 21st century.
  This is a society that has been for so long tortured and affected by violence - from the numerous draconian laws of the government, right wing backlashes, the war in Natal - that for a long time still art forms will and must reflect this reality. Our revolutionary songs, dances, poems and plays are packed with this.

But within the framework of this violent and solemn phase the progressive cultural movement has not, contrary to critical opinion, over-emphasised "pessimistic aspects" in the struggle for liberation. People like Njabulo Ndebele, Nadine Gordimer, James Matthews, Lewis Nkosi, Ari Sitas and others have continually shown, through their essays and creative works, that we are not locked in "clichés". Our culture has flourished amidst oppressive regulations, limitations and prohibitions. The canvas of works from organisations such as Jazzart, Community Arts Project, Congress of South African Writers, Imvaba Arts, Cosatu Cultural Unit, South African Musicians Alliance, Film and Allied Workers Organisation and many more, has been vast and innovative.

On the second issue, of white is beautiful, this statement must be seen in a context, and not in a vacuum. Historically, in South Africa, when it was said that black is beautiful, it was the national question which was being raised. That is why black people were killed when they said so. The apartheid machinery sought to crush any movement towards unity, when people were trying to claim their history. Black is beautiful was coined to unite Amazulu, Basotho, Mashangana, Indians, so-called 'Coloureds', etc. It was a call to claim dignity and freedom.

Similarly, white is beautiful can and must exist, and will be lived with in a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

My observations do not, in any way, fight against the narrow views of culture. Albie Sachs has eloquently stated some of our problems. We admit this readily, but it was not only because we were committed politically. Oppression is not abstract, it produces illiteracy, inexperience and very severe conditions under which people must work, including lack of skilled person-power and resources. There is also general agreement with Sachs when he points out that a cultural transformation has to take place. The question we all have to address is how to use the energy that apartheid has unleashed to create a culture of tolerance of differences of people in our country. How do we make it speak both in our minds and in reality? However, when we are addressing these issues, one has to bear in mind that no amount of criticism leveled at cultural workers by liberals, academics, journalists and others will change weaknesses in progressive culture - education, exposure, and exchange, and the eradication of apartheid will do so.

We agree that in the progressive movement, culture has been asserted as a unifying force, but how do our critics view the role of culture - as decorative ornaments, exclusive institutions, a little Europe in South Africa? Njabulo Ndebele once said that South African culture, in the hands of whites, the dominant force, is incapable of nurturing a civilization based on the perfection of the individual in order to permit maximum social creativity. Is the hegemonic group prepared to fully participate, or is the preoccupation in the crucial phase of our history going to be on the securing of group rights? How are we going to express the diversity of our problems and attempt to find the answers, if our critics are only prepared to be the arm-chair brigade, and are continually trying to take the offensive position?

What happens to the "pure arts" - ballet and opera - how do we take them away from the preserve of the bourgeoisie and make them accessible to the majority of the people? Soviet ballerina Galina Ulanova considered that ballet can express something important, some great and vital truth about the beautiful things that live in the human heart. Let the bastions

of "pure art" help in exposing these wonderful, romantic notions to the masses, and let them judge the statement of Ulanova.

In what way should cultural workers fuse their works with "pure art"? If our critics find the products of "mass culture" or popular culture an inferior substitute for "true" works of culture, then what is their solution? Are works that are imbued with social and political significance - the works of a realist trend - unworthy of a real creative cultural worker? Or is it the curious paradox that amongst those who are shouting the loudest, and supporting for the wrong reasons some of the pertinent issues that Sachs raises, are in fact some of the greatest hounders of freedom?

These questions must be answered by our critics. The progressive cultural movement is ready to participate in such deliberations, but our critics must move away from their liberal positions and be involved in a far more constructive manner. These are the real challenges facing us - that in the present period of development and transition, winds of change can only blow if both advocates of progressive culture and those who are critical of it, can expend energy to debate and discuss the issue, without attacking the one side continuously.

Let us have our own battlefield of ideas. If we let polemics go beyond aesthetics, we could together probably reaffirm the role of culture in educating people in the phase of transformation; of surmounting obstacles and contradictions in the path towards building a new society. *Let culture become a site of struggle in itself.* It could then consistently address some of the questions I have already raised.

Within the progressive cultural fold, the projects, debates and discussions encompass a broad spectrum of issues - women, language, criteria and standards, the documenting of our cultural heritage, and a host of others. Culture, as a site of struggle, should broaden these debates to include all cultural practitioners, and especially those who do not sit easy as members of the liberation movement.

Our critics must also make the effort to view grassroots culture. There have been countless examples of people being critical of progressive culture simply on the basis of newspaper reports or relying on another person's interpretation of some-

thing they have seen. There is also the general misconception that the Market Theatre reflects innovative progressive culture - this is very far from fact. Our Qabula's, Mahlasela's, Zondi's, Hlatshwayo's, Malange's, Dikeni's, Rampolokeng's and thousands more, reflect the diversity of our art, writings, performance, music and other disciplines.

Culture, as a site of struggle, during the phase of transformation, should consider Ngugi wa Thiong'o's statement that the divide and rule colonial origins of explaining any differences in terms of ethnic origins of the actors still exists. Therefore, the challenge we face, as Ngugi reflects, is that we do not want a culture of apemanship and parrotry to be enforced by police bullets, barbed wire, quirts and by a corpus of intellectuals, academics and purists. How do we overcome this? What, exactly, will become the quest for relevance? Do progressive cultural workers discard Aeschylus, Sophocles, Chekhov, Donne, Shakespeare, Milton and others to read only Marx, Engels and Lenin? Do we throw into our dustbins racist writers like Huxley, Haggard and Monsarrat? Do we only promote the progressive writings of Zola, Faulkner, Shaw, Brecht and Neruda? And how many of our critics are familiar with the works of Hove, Serote, Kgositsile, Neto, Machel, Castro, Sankara, Guevara, Ngugi, Achebe, Soyinka, Nkosi, Themba and others?

In our attempts to foster unity amongst all the people in the land, let us as cultural practitioners move from the position of strength and not of ignorance.

Sachs and cultural heritage: echoes of Léopold Senghor?

Betty O'Grady

At a recent debate on "Solidarity and imagination: rethinking cultural practice", Albie Sachs explained the circumstances which gave birth to the paper that has aroused such lively discussion both here and overseas, among writers and readers alike. Although the position he defended was the culmination of many years of experience and reflection upon the role of culture in the liberation struggle, his intention he says, was also to be provocative, to open up the debate and stimulate new and critical thinking.

It is with much the same intention that Albie Sachs' statements on culture are here compared to those of Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the three founding poets of the Negritude movement in the 1930's. The parallels are not drawn in order to undermine what Albie Sachs has been saying: as it is widely recognised, his paper comes at a time when the cultural arena in South Africa is very much in need of new perspectives and Albie's eloquence and warm sincerity make him the best person to call for a change of direction without wounding those who, during the past two decades or more, have been struggling to give expression to the bitter struggles that have divided the people of South Africa.

Nevertheless, it is with a strange sense of *déja vu* that one hears Albie's call for a renewed pride in one's cultural heritage, be it Zulu or Afrikaner or British. Sixty years ago Léon Gontron Damas, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor and many other black

writers from Africa and the Caribbean were making the same call for a return to their cultural roots. They too believed that by recognising and affirming the riches of their African heritage, they would grow in self-understanding and realise their full humanity. Senghor, the eloquent theorist for the Negritude movement, was and still is strongly criticised by many black writers: the now famous ironical retort of Wole Soyinka, that the tiger is not concerned with his tigritude, he just pounces on his prey, sums up the reaction of many of the Anglophone African writers. Nor is Senghor's position supported in all of Francophone Africa. Most Congolese writers for example, who are fiercely independent and do not identify closely with the cultures of West Africa, would concur with the views of one of their finest poets, novelists and playwrights, Tchicaya U Tam'Si. For U Tam'Si, it was important firstly to understand himself as a man, then as a Congolese and finally as a black man. For Jean-Pierre Makouta-Mboukou, another Congolese writer, much of the Negritude poetry represents "un retour béat, pour ne pas dire narcissique, aux sources".[1]

Yet, at the same time that Albie says "I am tired of non-racialism", he also voices the hope that a new South African art will emerge which will be a blend of the many and varied cultural traditions that exist in this country. Senghor expresses a similar idea when he speaks of "métissage culturel" and a "civilisation de l'universel".[2]

Is Albie Sachs then not saying anything new? Is he merely re-opening an old debate in a different context? To assume this would be to miss his fundamental message, which does not aim to undermine the solidarity of all those who have seen culture as an arm in the struggle. Albie has made a bold call for writers and cultural workers to face up to and to explore the contradictions that exist between those most committed to the struggle. He has said that individual differences should be welcomed and respected; simplistic slogans, which confine people in opposing camps, should be critically re-examined. Albie sees the cultural debate as an on-going dialectic, where any positional statement is fraught with paradox. To take his idea a little further, truth lies within that very ambiguity and any attempt to make definitive statements can only distort that truth. In this,

Albie's thinking is close to that of Tchicaya U Tam'Si, who says through a character in one of his novels, "Identifier une chose, c'est limiter ses possibilités".[3]

However, to recognise the need for critical re-assessment and new directions is not enough. The time has come now to be asking ourselves what aesthetic criteria are important for us. We recognise that it is not enough merely to protest. We also know the pitfalls facing those who take refuge in a neutral world of ethnic traditions. We still have difficulty in escaping the weight of Western aesthetic criteria, which we have been conditioned to believe are universal. It is difficult to see the way ahead, for the effects of decades of isolation and cultural deprivation have taken their toll. Yet perhaps we do not need to look too far afield. Now is the time to take advantage of the relaxing political restrictions and to open up channels of communication with our fellow Africans to the north of us. These countries have been through the trauma of liberation struggles. There too, in the pre-independence years, art was seen as a political weapon. But today writers are grappling with a whole range of new problems and the vibrant wealth of contemporary writing from West and Central Africa, as well as the Maghreb, bears testimony to the creative ways in which they have confronted the post-independence era. Their writing is a rich source of inspiration which needs to be explored.

In attempting to understand what distinguishes these literatures from those of say, South America or Western Europe, it would be mistaken to try to establish some sort of "African aesthetic", in the same way as Senghor called for a truly "African philosophy". It is not possible to contain within a single set of criteria the variety of form and expression from countries as different as Senegal, Kenya or the Congo Republic. However, many writers from these countries share similar concerns and it is useful to look at the ways in which they attempt to express them, for it may offer some pointers as to the way ahead for us.

Every writer in Africa has to face up to the reality of a dual, if not multiple, cultural heritage. It is just not possible to escape the contradictory forces of dominant Western cultural traditions and those of Africa. The tensions manifest themselves at every level and but one aspect of this is the debate as to whether

writers should express themselves in their mother tongue or in a European language. In their creative writing, poets and novelists have had to reconcile two conflicting thought systems; on the one hand, that of an essentially individualistic, soul-searching Western romantic tradition and on the other, the African imperative, whereby they are called upon to identify with the struggles of their people. They have responded in a variety of ways, using innovative language and form - in ways that the average Western reader may well find alienating or shocking. A writer such as Sony Labou Tansi from the Congo, calling upon all the resources of his complex cultural heritage, takes the French language and forces it into a medium capable of expressing the Congolese reality. His language may be considered shocking, crude or incoherent, but the linguistic violence is never gratuitous and his merciless humour and irony are profoundly challenging. "La parole est une sorcière impitoyable", says a character in one of his plays.[4] The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka has turned to the traditional myths of the Yoruba deities as the source of communal, archetypal experience needed to provide new strength for action in the world of today. Tchicaya U Tam'Si has created a poetic universe of dense, symbolic images that are firmly rooted in Congolese traditions and yet are also intensely personal. In fact the manner in which the intensity of personal experience is combined with a sense of collective identity and suffering is a hallmark of the best African writers. A further important dimension to the dialectic concerning personal as against collective expression, is an aspect which has yet to be fully explored. That is the whole subject of orality and the way in which contemporary writers are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by pre-literate traditions.

In their thematic concerns, African writers today are equally innovative. Perhaps those who are actively engaged in the struggle against oppression and injustice do still talk about politics in bed, but certainly in their writing they are able to sing, without apology, of the beauties of their land and their pleasure in the joys of human existence. They also have had the courage to turn away from the colonial administrations as the scapegoat for all the ills of Africa and they speak out boldly against

corruption and exploitation within the ranks of their own leaders and political parties.

Amongst the wide variety of themes, it is possible to identify some that are recurrent. For example, in the face of failed dreams of freedom and equality, the resulting sense of disillusionment and despair may be expressed in terms of a journey, which mirrors a spiritual quest for identity. The imagery and language are often those of ritual and in particular of the initiatory journey, which enacts, through suffering, death of the old self and birth of the new man.[5]

The variety of ways in which writers from Africa have created new poetic forms and a language capable of expressing their particular way of perceiving their world, validates Albie Sachs' view that the time has now come to look critically at South African cultural practices and if necessary, destroy in order to create anew. To do this, South African writers and artists need to see themselves as an integral part of the whole African continent. By tapping in to the vast experience and resources of those countries who have trod the path before us, new forms of expression may be forged, capable of conveying the uniqueness of the South African experience.

Notes

1. "A complacent, if not narcissistic, return to source." J.-P. Makouta-Mboukou, *Introduction a l'étude du roman négro-africain de langue française* N.E.A. 1980: 240

2. "cultural interbreeding"; "universal civilisation"

3. "To define a thing is to limit its possibilities." Tchicaya U Tam'Si *Les cancrelats* Albin Michel 1980: 151

4. "Words are a pitiless enchantress." Sony Labou Tansi *La parenthèse de sang* Hatier 1981: 50

5. See for example Yodi Karone *Nègre de paille* Silex 1982; Williams Sassine *Le jeune homme de sable* Présence Africaine 1979; Tchicaya U Tam'Si *Ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain* Seghers 1987.

Cultural imagination and cultural settlement: Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele

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The general point of departure for this paper is simple and very obvious. Something unusual is happening in the discussion of, and commentary upon, cultural practice in South Africa. It has been going on for some time in a fragmented and hidden way, but since the arrival of Albie Sachs's seminar paper the arguments and terms have been brought forward and given a degree of coherence. The paper is interesting in itself, but perhaps even more interesting has been the volume and the range of the response it has evoked.

In a more particular way the starting point for me emerged from Sachs's use of the phrase "cultural imagination". It seemed to be the central organising term for his argument and it set up links between his proposals and the similar call for the "freeing of the social imagination" made by Njabulo Ndebele in his paper "Redefining Relevance" published in Pretexts (Vol 1, No 1).

What was immediately striking to me was the return to prominence of the word "imagination" and I thought it would be worth asking, in public so to speak, what the terms of its return were likely to be and what consequences that might have

for cultural practices in general, including criticism and teaching.

Since I am neither a literary academic nor an artist, my approach will inevitably be somewhat oblique and generalised. The possible advantages of this lie in detecting the broad contours and obvious masses involved in the change of terms. The all too obvious disadvantages lie in the absence of detail and the lack of precision. The paper has to be content with being suggestive because it lacks the means for being definitive.

Ndebele's assessment of cultural practice since the 1950's proposes a two phase schema. His division is between "protest writing" and the new phase he is calling for in which "the challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society".

He argues that "protest writing" flourished in the 50's but failed to respond to the changing conditions of oppression in the 60's and 70's during which period the practices persisted as, in his words, "a pathology".

There are echoes of this in Sachs where he talks of being "still trapped in the multiple ghettoes of the apartheid imagination(?)" and, "it is as though our rulers stalk every page and haunt every picture; everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed . . .".

And Sachs also shares with Ndebele a "redemptive" emphasis. The new formulations will "break free from the solemn formulas of commitment" (Sachs p 3) or "break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression" (Ndebele p 45).

Three settlements - not two

My argument begins with an attempt to differentiate three rather than two phases in the period 1950-90. I want to call these phases "settlements" and the term needs a brief description if it is going to be at all useful.

Cultural imagination (or social imagination) in South Africa - at least over the period under discussion - has been formed

and shaped between two principal forces. The first is the need to comprehend, to express and to judge the all too obvious conditions of oppression. The second is the need to understand and work with the conceptions of imagination entering the South African cultural discourse from abroad - especially of course Western Europe and North America - but elsewhere as well.

The notion of "settlement" that I am using (stolen from educational literature) identifies as a product the different forms which the dialectic between these two forces has taken at different times. Each "settlement" provides a relatively stable, relatively durable formulation of intellectual functions, monopolies, distribution, qualification, and access - a definition of the dominant forms of intellectual work and hence, perhaps most importantly, of authorisation.

It goes without saying that these "settlements" rest on changing political and economic foundations and I will say something, though not a lot, about this connection as we proceed.

The three settlements are almost certainly familiar to all of you here but I want to recall them in a fair degree of detail because the ground covered will enable me to make clear my arguments about Sachs's and Ndebele's position: what they endeavour to put together and what they exclude.

The settlements are: firstly, the liberal/formalist period which retains its dominance from 1950 to the early 1970's; secondly the revisionist period which establishes and maintains itself from the mid 1970's through to ± 1986; the third is the one we are watching form itself in the papers under discussion.

In some respects the periods of rupture and transition are more illuminating than the times of stability and dominance, but both aspects require some description if we are to get a strong enough grip on the process we are engaged with at the present.

The liberal/formalist settlement

The core doctrine on which these formulations of practice were constructed is now known in critical shorthand as the autonomy of the text. The familiar definitions are that the art work was self-constitutive and self-enclosed. It contained within itself all of the reasons why it was as it was, and not otherwise. Archibald Macleish's aphorism put the case in a classical way: "A poem should be; not mean".

The work structured itself as a world in terms of its own immanent laws and as a consequence the author disappeared - as did, crucially, the relations between the text and its conditions of production distribution and reception. It raised itself outside of, and hung above, the flux of history and the structures of the present.

The intellectual purpose sustaining this doctrine expressed itself in terms of values. The function of the work was to carry, to the fullest degree possible, the variety, complexity and density of human experience and to organise its experiential freight into a universalising moral pattern.

This was of course British and American "new critical" doctrine and the forms that it took in the South African liberal settlement are accurately picked up in Ndebele's discussion. He speaks of three rhetorical modes:

> 1. The identification and highlighting of instances of general oppression:
> 2. the drawing of appropriate moral conclusions from the revealed evidence: and
> 3. the implicit belief in the inherent persuasiveness of the moral position (Ndebele p 42).

On the ambiguous consequences of the moral position for South African cultural practice he is also accurate. On the one hand he says, "It needs to be stated that the moral position, when we consider the overall circumstances in which recourse to it was taken was, of course, entirely valid and correct" (p 43); but at the same time he argues a case of the entrapment of the oppressed in a rhetoric of moral protest: "Easily believing an abstract moral code, they become victims of false hopes" (p 43).

I am not sure that Ndebele's argument of a conceptual reification of the formalist doctrine is entirely correct but I think he

is correct in seeing that it was the *abstract* nature of the code which produced the entrapment.

Describing the hardening of the position he says,

> We were shown in this literature the predictable drama between ruthless oppressors and their pitiful victims; ruthless policemen and their cowed, bewildered prisoners; brutal farmers and their exploited farm hands; cruel administrative officials in a horribly impersonal bureaucracy, and the bewildered residents of a township, victims of that bureaucracy; crowded trains and the terrible violence that goes on in them among the oppressed; and a variety of similar situations (p 44).

Formalist irony and closure

The liberal/formalist settlement rested, more so in South Africa than in its Euro-American context, on a hidden point of closure. The works emerged not from individuals or a class or a place or a time but from a hypothesised universal, transcendental, mind. That was the effective hiding place and it was under the pressure of the uncovering of this secret place that the settlement began to break up.

I don't want to leave the formalist settlement with just this brief reference to its hidden point of closure because I think that the kind of openings it made possible produce important resonances in both Sachs and Ndebele.

The redemptive thrust of both papers is towards "complexity" "contradictions" "hidden tensions" "ambiguity" "imaginative recreations" and the exploration of specific genres. In both papers the case they are arguing against is given as the static, predictable, formulaic rehearsals of fixed positions.

Ndebele includes at the centre of his paper a discussion of irony which recalls, at the same time that it works to displace, the formalist construction of irony. For the formalists irony was *the* literary figure precisely because it was through it that the openness to complex experience could be sustained without damage to the formal order of the work. Ambiguity, tension, complexity, etc. were the code words for successful literary

practice and they were aimed against ideological narrowing of the scope of the art. Irony opened the pathway from "experience" towards the construction of the universalising pattern.

For the purposes of the present discussion what is I think of interest is the recourse that both papers - and many of their discussants - have had to a similar concept of irony.

I will attempt to distinguish this use of irony from others as the paper proceeds so, for the moment, I would like to store it under the heading *incorporative irony*. It carries through, at an intellectual level, what liberal politics attempted to do at a social level - to incorporate disparate elements within a synthesis of "civilised life", the whole of which worked, as the revisionists so sharply pointed out, to the benefit of limited and obscured class/group interest. Entrapment is the oppressed's experience of incorporation.

The revisionist settlement

The revisionist settlement is absent as a concept from both Sachs's and Ndebele's arguments. The conditions produced by the settlement are, however, I think, the principal issues against which they have mobilised their arguments. Yet, at the same time, I will suggest, they have constructed their vantage points on an appropriation of parts of the same revisionist formulation.

The revisionist settlement runs from around 1972 to around 1986. Its initial impetus derives from the powerful intellectual currents working through Western Europe and North America following the reconstruction of Marxism. It entered South Africa principally through the historians who derived their licence and their frameworks from the research work done at SOAS in London.

The framework provided the possibility of a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the conditions of oppression - and produced a critical thrust which not only successfully ruptured and dislodged the liberal/formalist formulation but also established the terms of the new settlement.

The success on both counts derived from the fact that it was able to deploy a comprehensive theory not only of social structure but of historical process as well. The task of the social imagination was to conceptualise the totality of the system through an understanding of the interrelations of its parts. The stasis of formalism was broken up in a radical relocation of historical actors and the affirmation of an implicit teleology in the historical process.

The specific openings that the new settlement made possible are well enough known not to require rehearsal - and their importance need not be restated. However, there are some important features of the cultural practice authorised in the revisionist settlement which need to be noted because they lead back towards the business in hand - the formulations of Sachs and Ndebele.

The relocation procedure which sits at the centre of revisionist work carries a double implication for the cultural practitioner - whether writer, critic or teacher. The first of these is that the practitioner him/herself has the capacity - even the duty - to select and secure a position - a point of perception and enquiry, within the terms of the framework. Authorial reflexivity comes to be defined as self understanding as a historical subject within the historical process. (It needs to be added that it was a particularly limited version of history.) Consequent upon that, though not without conflict, came the fact that some positions were more adequate to the historical task than others and therefore became positions of choice.

During the period of settlement one of the most striking features of intellectual practice was the migration of practitioners towards positions of significance. These migrations were both material and symbolic. The details need not detain us for long - the unions; oppositional publishing; oppositional education; oppositional cultural organisations on the one hand; explicit ideological commitments on the other.

The second feature of cultural practice was a steady foreshortening and narrowing of the perspectives of enquiry. This was in essence a product of the assumption underpinning the settlement; that cultural expression had itself a material character - it *was* history and *in* history simultaneously. History

could be directly apprehended and intervened upon through cultural works. The powerful empirical thrust of revisionist historical work gave the warrant for, and secured the assumption. It was this which provided the point of closure for the settlement and as a result placed culture "in the struggle".

The consequence of both features of practice was the identification of the goal of revisionist cultural practice with the notion of correct political practice within the teleology given in the framework.

It may seem odd to speak again, in this context, of irony because the terms I have used so far here seem to preclude any and all notions of irony - at least as it was discussed earlier. But there does seem to me to be another sense in which the word should return.

Behind the assumptions of the revisionist settlement and sustaining much of the work was a form of dramatic irony. History would deliver its judgements upon the presumptions, and the sufferings, of its various actors - and things would not turn out as they had seemed to be under the liberal settlement. The revisionists were in the business of delivering the ironic revelations.

It may be worth noting that the position is only a shade less lofty than that taken up by the formalist practitioners.

I make this point about irony because it takes the discussion back once more to the two papers under consideration. When both call for "imagination" it seems that what both are protesting against is the absence of the ironic vision from current cultural practice; and that what they are calling for is something akin to a return to the incorporative modes of the earlier settlement, though as I shall try to explain in a moment, with one important difference.

What Sachs is protesting against is precisely the foreshortening and narrowing of perspectives of enquiry. His objection is to the relocative strategy employed within a limited definition of the framework. Under the telling rubric "solidarity criticism" he writes,

> Instead whether in poetry or painting or on the stage, we line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other, occasionally permitting someone to pass from one column to the

> other, but never acknowledging that there is bad in the good, and, even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad; you can tell who the good ones are, because in addition to being handsome of appearance, they can all recite sections of the Freedom Charter or passages of Strategy and Tactics at the drop of a beret (Sachs p 2).

However, the point cannot be overlooked that these comments gained their salience precisely from the fact that it was Sachs who was speaking, and not some unregistered and unauthorised voice. The energy of the responses derives less from the argument than from the location of the voice.

It is a relatively simple matter to satirise the excesses of locative (and relocative) work if you yourself hold an authoritative location.

Nonetheless the resonance with the earlier quoted passage from Ndebele is strong. The rehearsal of fixed positions occurred within both the formalist and the revisionist settlements.

Before moving forward from the revisionist settlement an important question remains to be answered. Why is it that neither Sachs nor Ndebele make reference to what I have taken to be an important phase in recent cultural formulations? In Ndebele's case I think the answer is fairly straightforward. He regards the revisionist period as simply a continuation and a reification of the previous formalist settlement. In his argument liberalism turns, inevitably, into neo-Marxism or historical materialism, without effectively altering the "epistemological structures of South African oppression".

I think his view is mistaken but nonetheless extremely important. The crucial assumption which sustains his conviction can be traced to a pronoun - and it is on the interpretation of the pronoun that he differs so sharply from Sachs. When Ndebele speaks of "our people" as in

> It seems to me that these are the most important questions (about the education system; the legal system; the public health system; cultural policy etc.) that have ever been asked by *our people* in recent times, and they are questions that can only be answered fully from as complete an understanding as possible of the position from which they have been asked (p 46)

there can be no doubt that he has in mind the Black oppressed. They have, in his scheme, a position which does not register within the revisionist framework developed in Europe. This point has begun to emerge with greater frequency in recent discussions. See, for example, Blade Nzimande's comments on the failure of the white left to develop a Black intelligentsia (ASP conference, Cape Town, 1988) and Ivan Evans's paper, "The Racial Question and Intellectual Production in South Africa".

Sachs's understanding of the revisionist settlement is both wider and narrower than that shown by Ndebele. Beneath his arguments and observations is a celebratory (rather than redemptive) narrative. Even allowing for the rhetorical procedures appropriate to an in-house seminar, it seems clear that Sachs sees the emergence of the ANC as the fulfilment of the historical process foreshadowed in the revisionist settlement. The redemption is at hand.

His argument with his colleagues is founded on the facts that

> We are for ANC leadership; our organisation's *central* position has been hard won and the dream of the founders is slowly being realised. Without doubt, the ANC will continue to be the principal architect of national unity after the foundations of apartheid have been destroyed and the foundations of democracy laid (p 8) (emphasis added).

Thus for Sachs "our" represents not the Black oppressed but the ANC leadership and its support base.

The outcome, for my argument here, is that Sachs's case presents the ascendancy of the ANC as something akin to the fulfilment of history. It completes the closure on which the revisionist work was predicated; at the same time this exposes the limited terms of the conception of historical process. His argument is that with closure secure and evident, the opportunity emerges once more for the incorporative procedures of a formalist irony. The ANC will act as guarantor for the universality and moral validity of the cultural work of incorporation.

Problems and conditions of a third settlement

In the preceding paragraphs I have glanced at some of the problems confronting the attempts to formulate a new kind of cultural settlement based on "cultural imagination" or a freed "social imagination".

What I would like to do in this closing part of the paper is to force (perhaps artificially) the options and choices which are beginning to appear in the current period of rupture.

The first step will be to return to Ndebele's description of irony.

His opening move is to affirm the openness of the rules of irony.

> Irony is the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction. Its fundamental law, for the literary arts in particular, is that everything involving human society is in a constant state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic and that consequently in the representation of human reality nothing can be taken for granted (Ndebele p 47).

These are formalist rules of indeterminacy and inclusive tension.

However in his second move Ndebele continues

> If the writer has an ideological goal, and *he always has*, he has to reach that goal through a serious and inevitable confrontation with irony and must earn his conclusions through resulting sweat. And when *he has won that battle*, he will most likely leave us, the readers, *more committed*, but only on the necessary condition that we have been made to reflect deeply on the nature and implications of our commitment in the context of the compelling human drama presented before us (p 47) (emphasis added).

These are the revisionist rules of relocation and solidarity.

The position is incoherent. The indeterminate contradictions of human experience must be resolved to demonstrate the victory of a determinate ideological position.

In the measuring of the stresses within Ndebele's position the urgency of his commitment to both elements - the fullness of life and the victory of the oppressed - is not in doubt. However, what is put into doubt is the strength of his call for a redemptive formulation. What is it that should be redeemed?

A different version of the same problem underpins Sachs's call for a celebratory formulation of cultural practice.

We can take his invocation of Sholokov on the Tugela as a case:

> If we had the imagination of Sholokov, and one of us wrote: 'And Quiet Flows the Tugela' the central figure would not be a member of UDF or Cosatu, but would be aligned to [not a chief or even a member of - TM] Inkatha, resisting change, yet feeling oppression, thrown this way and that by conflicting emotions and through his or her torments and moments of joy, the reader would be thrust into the whole drama of the struggle for a new South Africa.

The incorporative generosity is impressive but this is no more, finally, than puppetry. The key may be in the phrase "resisting change" which may be exactly what the Inkatha hero(ine) is NOT, in their own awareness, doing - or it may be in the phrase "drama of the struggle" which in Sachs's argument has a closed, not an open end. Drama appears here to mean a style of presentation (tense, gripping, etc.) rather than an unpredictable open valuation.

Like Ndebele, Sachs's account of the cultural imagination remains incoherent. Both founder on the issue of closure. Both appeal to the notion of incorporative irony for the sake of greater range, flexibility, complexity and openness, but neither is able to relinquish the fixed point of closure in the framework of social action to which they have committed themselves.

Their endeavour to construct a new cultural settlement on the basis of appropriations from the two preceding settlements is understandably influential in the short term and does gesture towards a desire to get beyond the flattening effects of the current reified revisionism.

The proposals that they put forward are, however, unlikely to prove genuinely fruitful either in authorising new forms of

writing, criticism or teaching because they fail to unpick the crucial lock. As their arguments stand they both appear as advance programmes for a new ruling order settlement. It is that aspect which is locked up in the pronouns, and which structures the relations between the call for incorporative perspectives under the authority of a single position.

The unpicking of the lock (i.e. the opening up of the point of closure in which a correct historical position authorises cultural practice) is likely to come through the continuing commerce between local and foreign notions of cultural practice.

Both Sachs and Ndebele argue from within the assumption that cultural texts can, and should, be read back into history - that they are temporary representations which gain their significance in their impact upon "real action" (recall "more committed" and "culture must make its input to the Guidelines").

But such a position has already ruptured and crumbled under the impact of post structuralist and post modern theorisations.

Whether history is, or is not, also only a text, is still under dispute; but what is no longer tenable is the view that it is accessible to us in some way beyond or behind texts. "History is *not* a text," says Jameson, "not a narrative, master or otherwise but that as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form" (Jameson 81: 35).

Similarly, the relations between language, texts, discourses and historical subjects have been broken open in a way which makes it impossible to speak in the way that both papers do of "our people" as though they were in some sense coming already formed into history from the outside.

These forms of argument are already present and potent within South African cultural practice as the reports of the recent History Workshop and of the English Department seminars indicate, and their significance in the context of this discussion is that they are proposing a third reading of the function of irony which is neither incorporative to a hidden or explicit centre, nor relocative within a framework, but *translocative* across the lines of the multiple discourses that are constructing the cultural nodes and spaces of the society.

The best, most recent example I know of this form of work is Ivan Vladislavic's book of short stories, *Missing Persons*, where the intersections of different discourses open up not only the cross cutting tracks of history but also the problematic relations between subjectivity and location.

There is a great deal more to be done in this general area particularly in working through at the level of theory what post structuralist thinking entails, when it confronts the conditions of oppression in South Africa, but it does seem that it offers a stronger, more stable and more durable base for a settlement than the proposals coming from either Sachs or Ndebele.

Such a settlement will reach and go beyond the calls they make for complexity, ambiguity and flexibility. It will also dislodge the potentially inert and restrictive pressures which lie silently within both arguments. It will provide the best form of response to their openness and generosity at the same time as it unlocks their fixed positions.

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Sachs Albie
(undated) "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" ANC In-House Seminar on Culture (mimeo)

Afterword: The taste of an avocado pear

Albie Sachs

This is a tale of six cities. No story ever has a beginning, but the story of my proposed ban on saying that culture is a weapon of struggle dates back at least to Stockholm, early last year.

"We don't want solidarity."

The hallful of Swedish art curators were shocked at my words, wondering if they had heard me correctly, and if so, why organisers of an exhibition of southern African art had invited such an ungracious person to deliver opening remarks.

"We don't want solidarity," I repeated.

A hundred faces tightened in affrontment. I recalled Malangatana's words to a young Mozambican painter (they call them painters there, not members of the pictorial proletariat): "Say what you have to say boldly, force the viewer to notice your picture."

"The solidarity, which we appreciate very much, was to bring the works and the artists here . . . " Helen Sebidi was in the audience, and Bill and Bongi and Cameron and Sue, and the Mozambicans and Zimbabweans and Angolans, too, and standing at the back was Barbara Masekela, head of the ANC Department of Culture. "Now we want criticism, real criticism, not solidarity criticism. If you like the work, tell us . . ." Some of the pictures were excellent, others were poor, by any standards. ". . . And if you don't, tell us."

The faces relaxed into friendly Swedish smiles. The somnambulistic sureness of the occasion had been broken. They were listening. I was nervous, but it was worth it.

"And I think we should stop saying that art is an instrument of struggle."

Once more the tightness. I was the fifth speaker. Each one of the previous persons on the panel had said that art was an instrument of struggle, though some, to be different, had declared it was a weapon of struggle.

"Simply repeating the statement over and over again doesn't take us any further. It impoverishes both culture and the struggle. Our artists have a much more profound task, a more deeply political one, if you like, than merely providing decoration or stimulation for those in combat.

"You Swedes know who you are. Perhaps your artists have to explore underneath all your certainties, dig away at false consciousness. We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. It is there for all the world to see. But we don't know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African? The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves. Culture in the broad sense is our vision of ourselves and of our world. This is a huge task facing our writers and dancers and musicians and painters and film-makers. It is something that goes well beyond mobilising people for this or that activity, important though mobilisation might be."

My ten minutes were up. Other speakers took over, then there was music, then people milling around in the afterglow of the meeting, some of them debating whether it was right or wrong to say art was an instrument of struggle.

"Comrade Albie . . ." I was aware of a cultivated voice addressing me. It was Barbara, filling the space in front of me; when she calls me comrade, then I know a request is coming.

"Comrade Albie, you *must* come to the in-house seminar we are organising in Lusaka . . ."

I did not go to the seminar, I was exhausted after all my operations, but sent a paper instead. I called it "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom". I felt convinced that we ourselves, our movement, were indestructible, and that we were on the verge of big breakthroughs in South Africa. I was anxious to open up the debate and encourage our members to begin to glimpse in their minds the possibilities of freedom, to help ourselves move

away from the tight, defensive posture which had enabled us to survive the years of repression, and to enter with more openness and daring the terrain we were conquering.

New York. ANC office near the UN. Someone comes up to me, puts her arms around me and gives me a big hug. "Comrade Albie, your paper had a wonderful effect at the seminar. It was beautifully read by Comrade Victor, he brought out all the humour with a very dry voice. We argued about it on the floor, and we carried on arguing over tea and through the lunch-hour and at night." (So the comrades don't discuss the role of the white working class when they go to bed, they discuss my paper.) "We were split right down the middle. Then Comrade Lindiwe Mabuza came up with a beautiful answer. She said, 'Comrade Albie contradicts himself - his very paper is an instrument of struggle.'"

Eight months later, I'm in a hall at the University of Cape Town, speaking about the paper. It is wonderful and astonishing to be home. In Sweden you can pack a hall with art curators, in Cape Town with cultural workers. The evening is light, the discussion vivacious. There is poetry, a deeply emotional report from Natal - "How can we write poems about the beauty of the Valley of a Thousand Hills when blood is being spilt in the streets, when our sons come home and give the score of the dead, seven for us and three for them, like a football result?" This is passionate and direct debate, filled with humour and surprise and personal affirmation.

Ecumenical Hall, Durban. Another hallful of cultural workers, even more relaxed and spontaneous than those in Cape Town. A trade union leader stands up and says he finds that after all, Albie Sachs is innocent - he's a humorous chap and we feel sorry for him he lost his arm. The questions and discussion go on for a long time.

Johannesburg. COSAW meeting. Tense, half the audience agreeing tensely with what I say, half sitting in tense, silent opposition. We discuss the language question. "There's only one language," someone says, "and that is the language of revolution, and it doesn't matter whether it is in English or Zulu or Swahili." I disagree. People move and feel differently when they express themselves in their mother language. I wish we

could debate this question in a friendly way, with vigorous give-and-take. The culture of debate is perhaps more important than the debate of culture. We have to learn to talk and to listen, to listen and to talk. One feels so invigorated, so alive after a strong debate in a convivial atmosphere, and so flat after a weak debate in a tense atmosphere. We are almost there, but we just can't loosen up enough to let the argument take its course. I announce that, if FW can lift his banning order on the ANC, I can lift my banning order on saying that art is a weapon of struggle. No-one smiles.

Samora Machel used to say that to know the taste of an avocado pear, you had to cut it in half - in other words, let the contradictions come out; we should welcome crisis rather than run away from it. I regret that my paper came as a shock to many people working in the field of community arts, who saw it as implying that their work was of no value, because it failed to meet high aesthetic standards. Art and artistic endeavour need no justification. Perhaps we should not even try to define art, just do it and respond to it and argue about it. What I cannot regret is that there has been such a fierce discussion. *A conversa continua* - may the debate continue.

Cape Town, June 1990.

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This book brings together responses by a wide range of artists, teachers, theorists and cultural workers to Albie Sachs' in-house seminar paper on culture, "Preparing ourselves for freedom".

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