

ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES

Through their very existence, these venues work to alter the boundaries of art and the distribution of power within the art world. As alternative spaces obtain more critical mass, as they continue to be a proving ground for emerging artists and art forms, they will and are altering the structure of the art world, and are providing a path to a conception of art as more reflective of our cultural and social diversity.¹

‘Alternative’ is word that can be used as an adjective or as a noun, and in either case according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “two things that are mutually exclusive”. As an adjective, it is a term that must be seen as relative; for if a thing is ‘alternative’ it must therefore be alternative to some other thing. Used strictly as a noun it means literally “permission to choose between two things or two possible course of action”. With contemporary usage we now have in our vocabulary a broad range of terms that includes not only ‘alternative spaces’, but also ‘alternative music’, ‘alternative lifestyles’ and ‘alternative medicine’ to name a few. These formal definitions are particularly relevant when we begin to examine the use of the term ‘alternative’ as it is now employed within the language of cultural debate. In artistic practice, it refers to “that which is outside of the mainstream” and significant in the proliferation of these alternative artistic practices is the implicit affirmation that a more diverse group of artists are now giving themselves permission to actively create the possibility for ‘choice’.

In terms of alternative practice, one might say that the ‘alternative’ or ‘radical’ nature of such a practice can be expressed through its **content**, the **form** that the work takes, as well as the **identity of the artist** (the source of the “voice from which the art is spoken”). The ‘alternative’ in alternative art might then be seen as something that is manifest in any or all of these. One could, in fact, locate within a critical investigation into each of these distinct and yet inseparable three aspects, a substantial part of the current cultural debate.

¹ Collette Chattopadhyay; ‘Their Way - Nonprofit Spaces in Southern California’, *Artweek*, Vol. 23, August 1992, p.16.

The radical nature of some ‘alternative’ work is defined primarily through its ‘message’ or content. Work executed in a conventional format such as easel painting, static figurative sculpture or traditional narrative theater can be regarded as ‘oppositional’, because the issues raised are in and of themselves controversial. This work might deal with forbidden topics that address sexuality and gender, or might express views that are contradictory to those of the dominant political power. In any event, the challenge of the work resides in the radical nature of its message and the narrative power of a voice that communicates an unconventional position, but through the clear and readable language of a conventional art form.

However, alternative practice may also be defined through the form it takes. This work still seeks to provide an alternative voice and sees itself as oppositional in terms of its position, but is created out of a dissatisfaction **also** with what might be regarded as the limitations of the old forms. These shifts in format grow less out of a move towards aesthetic refinement or inventiveness for the sake of novelty, as they are born from a desire to break free from the perceived ‘autonomy’ of these conventional art forms, or a sense that they are ‘exhausted’. Artists engaged with these kinds of artistic practices might employ new genres or seek to merge art with ‘lived experience’ and challenge the viewer through confrontation with an art-form that may not be regarded by the public as ‘art’. Their intention is to break what they regard as a passive viewer’s complacency in front of out-modeled forms by challenging the artwork’s autonomy and by also seeking to expand its language.

On the one side, is the argument that many so called ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ works are elitist and unnecessarily obscure. From this position one would call for a work to express its radicality and social relevance via a transparent understandable ‘narrative’. Indeed, there is something reasonable in the assertion that a work can only effectively communicate an alternative position and bring about a change in consciousness when that work speaks in a language that can be comprehended by the viewer. Evidence of the complexities that can arise in this debate when a shift in context occurs can be seen in South Africa. Self-referential abstraction, though ‘radical’ within the historical and geographic context of post war Europe and the United States, was later seen as reactionary by many socially conscious South African artists seeking to expose the injustices of apartheid.

There is also merit, however, to the claim that it is impossible to address the pressing issues of the contemporary cultural debate with old forms; that these are aesthetic conventions that are too familiar and too easily commodified; the radicality of the message undermined. This viewpoint also asserts that there is a critical need to break out of the passive contemplation of the

art object (all too easily regarded as a decorative commodity) and push the very definition of what 'art' can be. Articulated here is the position that one must intrude aggressively into 'life' and confront the viewer with what might first be seen as incomprehensible, but will be ultimately liberating. For art to have continued relevance, this stance calls for it to speak through constantly reinvented new forms.

Interestingly, this debate is an old one and by no means resolved. Marxist intellectuals in the 1930's addressed it through the question of 'realism' in art. Lukács supported the concept of Social Realism while Bertolt Brecht offered an art which addressed the realities of its time through innovation. In his essay, *Against Georg Lukács*, Brecht speaks to this very question, within the context of a discussion of the novel, but the theoretical reflections that he offers have broader implications. Lukács criticizes what he sees as the decline of the contemporary novelist, and in Brecht's words, "is courteous" in his "treatment of contemporary novelists, in so far as they follow the example of the classic models of the bourgeois novel, and write in at least a formally realistic manner." One might see this "formally realistic manner" as a kind of narrative that is written in a transparent easily readable style, that communicates its 'social message' through a means that is not radical in form, but in content. Brecht challenges what he sees as Lukács' call for a return to this 'realism', not by proposing an autonomous 'formalism' divorced from 'reality', but by calling for a new definition of 'realism' and 'representation':

As time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new... whether a work is realistic or not cannot be determined merely by checking whether or not it is like existing works, which are said to be realistic, or were realistic in their time. In each case, one must compare the depiction of life in a work of art with life itself that is being depicted...²

He addresses this question of how one might engage in 'radical' practice through both the content of the work and the **form** it takes:

One can arouse a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions by many methods - by direct description (emotional or objective), but also narrative and parable, by jokes, by over - and under - emphasis. In the theatre, reality can be represented both in objective and imaginative forms. The actors may

² Bertolt Brecht; 'Popularity and Realism', Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed), *Art in Theory 1900 - 1990*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996 , p.489 - 496. Translation by Stuart Hood from *Adorno, et al*, 1977.

not use make-up or hardly any - and claim to be ‘absolutely natural’ and yet the whole thing can be a swindle; and they can wear masks of grotesque kind and present the truth. It is hardly open to debate that the means must be questioned about the ends they serve.³

Finally, Brecht speaks to the question of ‘popularity’ or the readability of new forms in terms of communication:

I am speaking from experience when I say that one need not be afraid to produce daring unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with a real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art who will interject: “Ordinary people do not understand that.” But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists.⁴

The debate between these two forms of alternative practices is thrown into sharp relief when one considers the work of socially conscious South African artists during the late period of the apartheid regime and the transitional period before and directly after the elections. The articulation of these two distinct modes of radical practice is particularly relevant to any discussions of alternative practice within the visual arts in South Africa, both in terms of the means and the messages employed by the historically significant protest art of the pre-apartheid generation and those employed by the post-apartheid generation.

In a conversation with Technikon Natal lecturer Lola Frost and lecturer from the United States, Kendall Buster, we discussed the relevance of these concepts of ‘alternative practices’ to the FLAT project:

Buster: One of the things that I think is interesting with the FLAT, is the shift with what is considered to be ‘avant-garde’. A lot of people might have been suspicious of the forms that the work was taking. It was highly experimental in its format, at least up until the middle. They would do installation, performance, things that were not necessarily as readable or comprehensible. Again the Brecht/Lukács debate where Lukács thought that something had to be readable, that it was transparent, it was communicating. Whereas Brecht would say you are underestimating the people. New ideas require new forms.

Frost: My understanding of the FLAT is that it wasn’t Lukácsian. It wasn’t about speaking to any ordinary populous. It wasn’t speaking in large understandable narratives. So it wasn’t socialist in that sense. Quite the opposite, it seemed the more esoteric, the more shocking, the more transgressive, the better. For God sakes, something was happening. We had been in the grip of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

apartheid or even in the grip of resistance art, laudable, but quite constrained. And what was going on at the FLAT Gallery was the lid coming off.

Allen: What I think is the best example of that is Ledelle's animals in the street. It essentially, without permission, invaded the public space, and it was illegal and therefore transgressive. The reason why she was able to do it was that there was at this time this sense of lawlessness - that you could do anything.⁵

In her comprehensive survey of South African Art - *Art and Artists of South Africa* - Esmé Berman talks about the emerging significance of art that addressed social issues internationally and in South Africa by saying:

The role of so-called 'Protest Art' was significant... but this phenomenon was not unique to local art nor was it a sudden development. The occurrence of protest art in the Republic was in step with a worldwide trend and had been presaged in the humanistic tendencies in the sixties, whereby South African artists had begun to examine their identity, to question their commitment to the human situation and to direct their artistic effort toward achieving greater relevance to the South African experience.⁶

She goes on to link alternative practice in art with the addressing of social issues by saying later in her discussion of the 1971 exhibition *Art - South Africa - Today*:

...the most avant-garde selection of entries thus far exhibited... incorporated a wide range of unconventional and provocative art forms. In content, however, the collective entry made a thought provoking statement about South African society.⁷

Of significance is this reference to "unconventional and provocative art forms." This referred primarily to "unorthodox materials" employed in sculpture and the use of photographic techniques with painting, which now seem hardly radical. However, the debate was a serious one at that time, and indeed is perhaps still revisited in the heated arguments that continue between those artists who champion the authenticity of hand-made labor intensive work over the mechanically reproduced or the conceptual gesture.

Not only was the content of South African Art undergoing change in the 1970s: art forms themselves were fundamentally affected by recent technological innovations and new attitudes

⁵ Frost, Buster, Allen; Interview 12, Richmond, Feb 1999.

⁶ Esmé Berman; *Art and Artist of South Africa*, Cape Town, Balkema, 1986

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 23.

towards existing materials and processes. The earliest demonstration of altering perspectives was the enthusiastic response of artists to the national *Multiple* competition organized by the Southern Transvaal region of the SAAA. Not that the venue was unattended by controversy. It met with resolute resistance from several members of the local art community, for whom the mystique of the artist's touch remained an inviolable taboo... the idea of technological replication was still rejected by some purists as the very antithesis of Fine Art production; and **years were to pass before certain SA connoisseurs could bring themselves to accept technology as a tool not a mortal enemy.**⁸

Again, alternative practice is seen as distinguishing itself through the experimental means employed as well as through the issues that are addressed. Also, the growing social consciousness that Berman refers to as “humanistic” led increasing numbers of South African artists to seek an alternative practice through work that embraced greater social relevance. The so-called ‘Resistance Art’ of the 70s and early 80s reflects this shift and represents an important period in South African art history.

Examples of this work are well documented in Sue Williamson's book *Resistance Art in South Africa*. The significance of resistance art is voiced in an opening essay where she addresses the critical need for an alternative practice to what was mainstream art at that time.

Before 1976 a trip around South African Art galleries would have given very little clue to the socio-political problems of the country. Strangely divorced from reality landscapes, experiments in abstraction, figure studies and vignettes of township life hung on the walls.⁹

This ‘conventional’ work was indeed blind to the political realities around it and yet the problem in moving beyond this ‘mainstream practice’ was complex. Williamson quotes Breyten Breytenbach in his outraged assessment of the white artist. Here he passionately argues the moral necessity for work that engages in social issues.

The white artist... cannot dare look into himself. He doesn't wish to be bothered with his responsibilities as a member of the ‘chosen’ and dominating group. He withdraws and longs for the tranquility of a little intellectual house on the plain, by a transparent river. The artist who closes his eyes to everyday injustice and inhumanity will without fail see less with his writing and painting eyes too.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

⁹ Sue Williamson; *Resistance Art in South Africa*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989

¹⁰ Ibid.

Later in her essay Williamson also addresses the difficulties faced by those Black artists who depended on sales for survival and were therefore hemmed in by a need to create uncontroversial marketable work:

The desperate attempt at head burying described by Breytenbach affected Black artists too - although for different reasons. Dependent on sales through art galleries to a White market Black artists tended to produce carefully non-confrontational work. Gathering the courage to challenge the state through their work would take time for Black artists.¹¹

Soon however, artists, both Black and White, began to organize through conferences. *The State of Art in South Africa* hosted by the University of Cape Town in 1979 was the first and brought to the debate the problem of inclusiveness and the position artists would take *vis-a-vis* the representation of South Africa abroad:

... the artists pledged to no longer allow their work to be sent overseas to represent South Africa until all state funded institutions were open to black as well as white students. By visual artists, at least, the apartheid regime would no longer be given the cloak of respectability.¹²

A later conference titled *Art Towards Social Development and Change in South Africa* was held in Botswana in 1982 and dealt with the theme of culture and resistance. Williamson marks this change towards an art that engages socially:

The debate had been opened up. In the years to come, there would be a growing realization amongst anti-apartheid forces that cultural resistance was a tool of immense power.¹³

Many artists continued to work with the language of traditional painting, printmaking and sculpture, but employed this language to address topical social issues with an expressive but readable narrative. New forms of work also were beginning to be explored. Mural projects, township art, anonymous laborers paintings and work that was true to the spirit of being art that “must have a function in the community” such as murals, banners, posters and T-shirts were all examples. Fully integrated into the community, these art forms sprang up out of creative necessity, and spoke to the immediacy of social issues. They were an integral part of the South African ‘alternative practice’. Most significant, however, was the fact that the ‘Resistance Art’ was not

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

only an ‘alternative practice’ in terms of message and means, but also through the multi-racial composite of the artists joining the debate.

Within the broad range of works that made up alternative practices in both South Africa and the United States in the 1970s one can observe work that claims an ‘alternative voice’ through each of these means. Certainly the divisions are not hard and fast with many artists moving between the two. Such forms as land art, performance art, and conceptual art in the United States expressed a resistance to ‘mainstream’ practice by way of radical changes in form. Also at this time, artists in both the United States and South Africa employed ‘conventional’ means, such as painting, sculpture and printmaking to address radical social issues. The creation of ‘alternative spaces’ was to play an essential role in the development and articulation of these practices, and a look at the history and development of these venues in both the United States and South Africa is instructive.

ALTERNATIVE SPACES

In the introduction to the book *Alt. Culture*, a dictionary of contemporary youth terminology, Matthew De Abaitua describes how the term 'alternative' came into common usage in the music industry:

Current use of 'alternative' in the music/youth culture world originated in the late seventies/early eighties when it was used to describe a strain of post punk music cultivated by a growing informal network of college radio stations but ignored by mainstream programmers. The word 'alternative' already had a cultural meaning; commonly associated with the independent oppositional press of the late hippie era this counterculture label also came to denote any lifestyle outside the mainstream.¹

These 'alternative' stations played 'alternative' music.

A similar linkage exists between alternative art forms and alternative spaces, in that an alternative space is formed out of the critical need to construct a venue, a site for the alternative practice to be expressed. Though an alternative space is not an absolute necessity, its development can be seen as an expression of the same spirit as that of alternative practices.

EARLY ALTERNATIVES

The term 'alternative space' was first applied specifically to a group of galleries that flourished in the United States in the early 1970s, and indeed the FLAT in many ways resembled these early efforts as well as the re-invented alternatives of the 1990s. These spaces were often described as co-operative, non-profit, transient, flexible and idealistically operated. As was to be the case with their counterparts in other parts of the world, they were run by artists for artists and were free of commercial intent. The particular impetus behind the formation of these alternative spaces often varied from site to site, but consistent in all was a discontent with the marketplace, the commercial galleries, institutions and museums. With this discontent came a critical need for the artists to take

¹ Matthew De Abaitua, introduction to N. Wice; *Alt.Culture*, 1996, p. 17.

more control over the exhibition of their work; to create a site for creative expression ‘alternative’ to the conventional venues.

In an examination of the non-profit spaces in Southern California, Collette Chattopadhyay lists a number of features that were common to many alternative venues and articulates their common concerns. She writes:

...these non-profit spaces generally differentiated themselves from their commercial cousins by location, audience, organizational structure and theoretical emphasis; relatively free of commercial intent, they presented work that **resisted commodification**, work that **questioned censorship** in the name of commercial interests, work **created by the statistically underrepresented**, work that **enunciated a relationship between art and society.**²

Many projects were initiated by artists who had been marginalized from participation in mainstream exhibition venues and who had begun to demand a voice. Inseparable from this influx of new perspectives was the pressing need for artists to engage in political and social concerns and to explore forms of work that might not necessarily be ‘marketable’ or ‘popular’ with the public. Jeffrey Kastner, in an article, *Uncertain Alternatives*, on alternative spaces echoes Chattopadhyay:

[These spaces] exhibited unheralded emerging artists, women artists, and artists of colour; and mounted exhibitions that expressed polemical positions and difficult political and social issues that museums and many commercial galleries shied away from.³

The significance that the alternative space played in the United States at this time in allowing ‘alternative’ voices to speak cannot be overemphasized, for alternative venue programming was “diverse not only in form but in subject and cultural perspective” presenting work “created by women, gays, lesbians and minorities who have traditionally been denied a voice within the existing commercial art market.” They also featured “work that addresses problems perceived as social in origin”, for part of the alternative agenda was to “provide a stable environment for the creation of innovative and experimental art that was socially involved”. They provided a “forum for the presentation of work that challenged not only artistic, but social and political boundaries as well.”⁴

² Collette Chattopadhyay; ‘Their Way – Nonprofit spaces in SoCal’, *Artweek*, Vol. 23, Aug 1992, p.16.

³ Jeffrey Kastner, ‘Uncertain Alternatives’, *ARTnews*, June 1996, p. 120-123.

⁴ Collette Chattopadhyay; ‘Their Way – Nonprofit spaces in SoCal’, *Artweek*, Vol. 23, Aug 1992, p.16.

These issues of bringing marginalized voices to the table and opening up a forum for dealing with political subject matter were of course even more critical in South Africa where political repression at home was coupled with the cultural boycott. Artists found themselves caught between the need to create a work of resistance to the apartheid regime while at the same time operating in a climate of cultural isolation brought on by the abhorrent policies of that same regime. Given the political realities of apartheid, efforts by artist groups to facilitate policies of inclusiveness regardless of race and to address political issues in their work were particularly charged with a sense of immediacy and purpose.

In South Africa, one such important project for exhibiting alternative work was the Market Gallery founded in Johannesburg in 1977. It was connected to the already established Market Theater and described by Paul Stopforth:

It is a gallery which functions as a real alternative to the commercial gallery system in South Africa, a space which allows for experimental work to be exhibited or performed that does not have an economic proposition.⁵

And he goes on to add:

Of great value was the fact that the complex was non-racial and functioned as a non-profit organization. A center that would not cater to the white ruling class seemed very important.⁶

The 'alternative' theater in South Africa indeed played an important role in creating an 'alternative' voice in the 1970s. In his essay *The Last Bastion of Freedom under Siege*, Anthony Ackerman writes about the importance of experimental theater in South Africa at that time and in an interesting aside tells how an alternative theater in Cape Town resisted government restrictions by operating as a 'club':

It is doubtful if as much would have been achieved without an infrastructure of alternative theaters. The universities made a significant contribution, but the venues that effectively sustained this work were the Space in Cape Town, which was founded by Brian Astbury in 1972, and the Market Theater in Johannesburg, which was founded by Mannie Manim and Barney Simon in 1976. The Space took advantage of a loophole in the Group Areas Act which made it possible to present controversial work to racially mixed audiences: it operated as a 'club' with membership, and not as a 'public' theater. The Market Theater which has always been open to racially mixed casts and

⁵ Paul Stopforth; *5 Years at The Alternative Gallery – The Market Gallery*, Johannesburg, Market Gallery, 1982, p. 5.

⁶ Ibid.

audiences, was initially the house theater for the Company, founded by Barney Simon in 1974. It is also a receiving theater for topical and socially critical productions from all over the country.⁷

Berman says of the Market Gallery:

At a time when black-white relations were at their lowest ebb following the Soweto riots of 1976, new congenial meeting-grounds for forward looking votaries of the arts in both groups presented themselves in the experimental, or 'alternative' theaters that had begun to flourish... in 1977, the launching of the Market Gallery in the complex housing Johannesburg's dynamic, integrated Market Theater Organization, provided a mutually-acceptable venue for **interracial communication and artistic dialogue**. Before long, the informal gallery had become the fulcrum of the metropolitan avant-garde and the energy center of the socio-political artistic community.⁸

And according to Joyce Ozinsky, the Market Gallery "provided the opportunity for young and unknown artists to show their work, and works that would otherwise be unacceptable because of their political references or experimental nature" and "provided a crucial alternative to commercial galleries and State museums."⁹

The creation of the Market Gallery at the Market Theater was important not only in terms of the controversial political content of the work and the efforts of artists in apartheid South Africa to bring diverse voices together, but also in the dialogue that was created between two art forms, theater and visual art. It broadened the audience by being "a space which because of its relationship with the theaters involved many more people in viewing the work than an isolated autonomous gallery."¹⁰ It spoke to the phenomenon that was beginning to occur in the USA and Europe; where boundaries between various art forms were becoming less distinct and where art was being seen as less autonomous and more related to the particular context of its production and presentation.

Ventures similar to the Market in Europe and in the USA regularly present work which is conceived specifically for the site, taking the visual and associative properties of the environment into account in the execution of the work. While this has not occurred to any great extent at the

⁷ Anthony Akerman; 'The Last Bastion of Freedom Under Siege', *Culture in Another South Africa*, 1989, p.55.

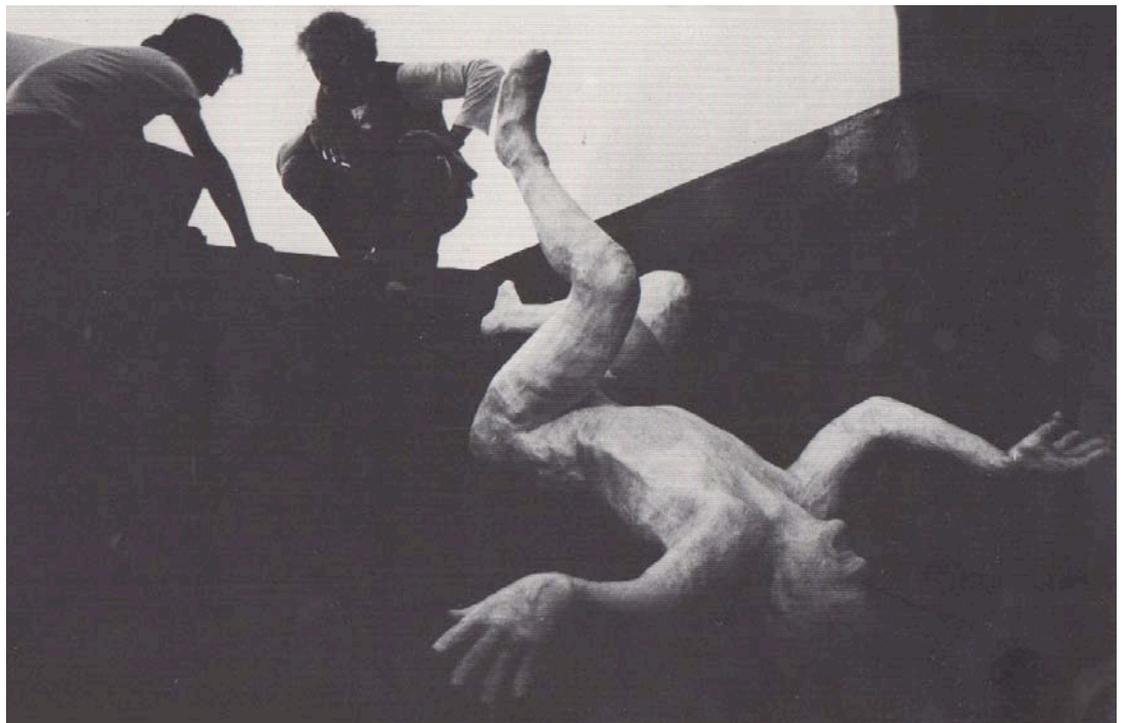
⁸ Esme Berman, *Art and Artists of South Africa*, Cape Town, Balkema, 1986, p. 24.

⁹ Joyce Ozinsky; *5 Years at The Alternative Gallery – The Market Gallery*, Johannesburg, Market Gallery, 1982, p. 1. Originally from an article in *The Rand Daily Mail*, 1981.

¹⁰ Paul Stopforth; *5 Years at The Alternative Gallery – The Market Gallery*, Johannesburg, Market Gallery, 1982, p. 5.

Market, there is evidence of some indirect influence of the complex's character on certain artists work. Particularly in what is chosen for exhibition.¹¹

Stopforth also acknowledges the connections that existed between the Market Theater and the Market Gallery with the American alternative scene by saying “the American cultural optimism of the sixties had introduced valuable ideas concerning the possibilities of various art forms feeding off one another.”¹²



PAUL STOPFORTH,
George Botha, mixed
media, 1977.*
An installation by
Stopforth at the
Market Gallery where
he utilized the
staircase leading up to
the gallery space.

Though the Theater and the Gallery would remain somewhat separate in terms of programming, and most of the Gallery exhibitions did not address the issues of site specificity, this idea of art forms feeding one on another to which Stopforth refers can be seen in his *George Botha*. Here, the artist placed the figure on the staircase, invading the viewer's space in a theatrical manner. This linked to parallel developments in explorations of site in other parts of the world, and suggested that the co-existence of the theater and gallery was significant. It marked the fact that the alternative voice of the Market Theater was seen as being also important within the visual

¹¹ Terence King; *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹² Paul Stopforth; *Ibid*, p. 5.

* This image is taken from *5 Years at The Alternative Gallery – The Market Gallery*, Johannesburg, Market Gallery, 1982.

arts, and it forecast the potential for a cross fertilization to occur between performing arts and visual arts. This hybridization would be a significant component in many of the alternative art projects that would later develop.

The bringing together of the sculptural and the theatrical could be seen in many of the FLAT performances. These included traditional sculpture projects with live performance elements, works where the process of the creation was presented with as much emphasis as finished display, as well as projects that attempted to break through the imaginary ‘fourth wall’¹³ of the traditional theater to directly engage the ‘real world’ and the audience.

Thus, alternative artistic practices at this time, in both South Africa and the United States, were not only significant in terms of the broadening of exhibition opportunities to include new groups or in the bringing of social and political issues to what had become an exhausted aesthetic debate, but also in the possibilities that these practices created for a profound shift to occur in the forms that the work might take. The alternative space provided a site whereby a particular kind of artistic activity was possible. In the United States, this was a trend that tended towards the dematerialization of the art object and the rejection of the standard commercial ‘white cube’. Again, this was intimately linked to the cross-fertilization of theater and art and an attempt to break out of the restraints of work that was considered to be too self-referential, autonomous, or object-like. It was an approach that would foster such movements in the 70s as ‘land art’, ‘conceptual art’, ‘environmental art’, ‘performance art’, site-specific work and installation. Many artists regarded these forms as political and ‘anti-capitalist’ by virtue of the fact that they were deemed unmarketable, and therefore ‘intolerable’ amongst the conservative establishment.

Chattopadhyay echoes this idea when she identifies ‘resistance genres’ as being those that are so by virtue of their controversial content, but also by operating through a form that resists commodification. She specifically highlights performance art as a genre that played an important

¹³ The fourth wall is a term that describes the invisible wall dividing the audience and the stage. In the traditional three sided theater the viewer is clearly separated from the drama as if ‘looking through a window frame’. This could be seen as parallel to the model of a viewer in front of an object. In the same way that installation or site-specific art might seek to engage with the viewer in his/her space, so the dramatic action in experimental theater might seek to intrude beyond this fourth wall. In terms of the ‘progressively radical’ theatrical strategies that an artist or playwright might employ to ‘break the fourth wall’, one might consider these examples: A playwright presents a play in the traditional theatrical manner and the work tells a story using characters with which the audience can identify. It contains no controversial material and it portrays values that one can identify as being consistent with the ‘conventional’ views of the audience. A second playwright may use a conventional narrative format, but the content of this drama touches on issues that challenge the audience and perhaps run counter to the political convention. The third playwright, however, employs devices that rupture a naturalistic dramatic presentation. He/she ‘breaks through the wall’ by invading the viewer’s space, speaking directly beyond the wall or taking the dramatic action out of the theater entirely. The most extreme break might occur in a dramatic presentation that invades the viewer’s space not only physically, but psychologically by presenting itself ‘as reality’, by ‘staging’ events ‘in the world’.

role in the programming of many alternative spaces perhaps because it seems to be particularly resistant to 'mainstream' assimilation:

These venues provided a context for the "immaterial", and illustrated that part of the impetus for the founding of alternative spaces had been the need to support work that emphasized the creative process even if it did so at the expense of the commercially perceived [at that time] product itself. The resistant genres which originally included installation, conceptual, performance... were [born at that time out of a] striving for a significance and meaning that would supercede the interpretation of art as commodity and of artistic process as production..... Its [performance art] continued presence within the alternative milieu undoubtedly is related to both commodity status issues and to the perception of its subject matter as controversial.¹⁴

Chattopadhyay speaks to performance art as a significant part of the programming for many alternative spaces in the USA in the 70s. However, it is RoseLee Goldberg, writing the first history of this genre in 1979, who first articulates performance art as a genre distinct from theater, and addresses its intimate linkage with other forms of 'alternative practices' throughout art history. Though she distinguishes 'performance art' of the 1970s by saying, "performance has only recently [in the 70s] become accepted as a medium of artistic expression in its own right"¹⁵; she traces its roots as far back as tribal ritual, and then follows its development through 15th century mock naval battles to the Futurists' manifestos. Like Chattopadhyay she emphasizes its radicality in terms of its resistance to commodification:

At that time conceptual art - which insisted on an art of ideas over product, and on an art that could not be bought or sold - was in its heyday and performance was often a demonstration, or an execution of those ideas.¹⁶

She describes the role of performance as a tool to break with convention and distinguishes it from traditional theater by its open-ended nature:

Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art... Unlike theater, the performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative. The performance might be a series of intimate gestures or

¹⁴ Collette Chattopadhyay; 'Their Way - Nonprofit spaces in SoCal', *Artweek*, Vol. 23, Aug 1992, p. 16.

¹⁵ RoseLee Goldberg; *Performance - Live Art 1909 to the present*, New York, Harry Abrams, 1979, p. 6 - 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

large-scale visual theater, lasting a few minutes or many hours, it might be performed only once or repeated many times...¹⁷

She addresses the social implications in performance work and its importance in alternative practice by saying that:

the history of performance art in the twentieth century is the history of **permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables, executed by artists impatient with the limitations of more established art forms, and determined to take their art directly to the public.**¹⁸

As discussed earlier, the alternative theater in South Africa played a particularly vital and culturally active role by bringing together racially diverse viewers and artists, as well as by addressing controversial topics in the work. Though its ‘radicality’ was expressed primarily by way of the content of the presentations and differed from the many examples of ‘performance art’, including the genres in the United States to which Chattopadhyay and Goldberg make reference, the cross-fertilization of theatre and visual arts was still significant. Performance art would later be an important component to the FLAT gallery’s programme, and some of the most experimental and controversial works presented were in this genre. Most of the FLAT performances fell outside of the traditional theatrical model. Though, the gallery hosted a number of evenings of experimental music that were presented within the format of a staged event, more common were evenings of performance art, which included *tableaux vivant* installations, improvisational ‘happenings’, sound art presentations and a ‘faux’ exhibition. This strong element of performance in the FLAT programming is important to note, because it is identified as being a form especially suited for ‘experimental’ work.

Performance art as well as conceptual art, site specific works, and works that were developed out of the creative ‘hybridization’ of genres defined an alternative artistic practice by way of innovative art forms. Alternative practices were also defined at this time by work originating from artists who had been previously excluded as well as work that addressed social and political issues, but both operated with a clear disdain for the dictates of the marketplace or conventional definitions of art.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Because these alternative spaces ran counter to commercial interests they required a structure that reflected the spirit of their philosophy. They were able to maintain a certain “freedom” and flexibility by operating with very little of the ‘support’ structures that commercial galleries or museums required. As was to be the case later with the FLAT Gallery, the spaces created in the early 70s in the United States were self funded and run out of lofts owned by the artists or warehouses owned by friends of the artists. They relied heavily on the ad hoc supervision of highly motivated young idealistic volunteer artists for operation as well as programming.

The FLAT programming was created without any advance planning, and exhibitions and events were mounted as interest or opportunity presented itself. Interestingly, this seemingly ‘loose’ curatorial organization for programme scheduling was a characteristic shared by the FLAT with many of these early alternatives in the United States.

GORDON MATTA-CLARK, *Cherry Tree*, 1971.*
Matta-Clark installed a tree in the basement of 112 Greene Street (White Columns).



Jeffrey Kastner quotes Bill Arning who describes one of the oldest in New York City, White Columns (which is still in operation), as it was in the early 70s:

White Columns... seemed a blissful free for all... [The space in its earliest days] was a strange and wonderful place. Artists' work was not reviewed. Slides were not looked at. If you were recommended by someone involved with the space you could just mount a show. A calendar was hung on the wall and you could decide when you wanted a show and for how long.²⁰

* This image is taken from the *ARTnews* article 'Uncertain Alternatives' by Jeffrey Kastner, June 1996.

²⁰ Jeffrey Kastner; 'Uncertain Alternatives', *ARTnews*, June 1996, p. 120 – 123. As White Columns and other alternative

This policy of open impromptu programming, a feature of the FLAT Gallery as well as many infant alternative spaces, continued to be a central issue with those alternative projects that were formed in the decades that followed. An open policy for exhibitions brought with it a wonderful ‘anything goes’ spirit but also a giddy lack of quality control. Though this fostered a climate that encouraged a special breed of fearless experimentation that was perhaps essential for the development of new art forms, criticism followed around the question of ‘professional’ standards. Indeed, the FLAT was regarded with skepticism by some established artists and critics in Durban (particularly in the beginning) because it operated with such an open exhibition policy.

As was the case with the curatorial functions and the programming, so too the operation of most alternative spaces was provided not by professionals on payroll budgets but by the initiative and commitment of the artists involved. Often the problem of finding a site for an alternative space would be solved by opening up private studios or lofts to the public or by bartering labor for space. The FLAT was housed in an apartment and operated through the volunteer efforts of the apartment's occupants and the artists who participated in the various programmes.

Southern Exposure in San Francisco was an artist initiative where the artists involved took on the responsibility of reconditioning an abandoned building in lieu of rent. Meredith Tromble reports in a conversation with Robbin Henderson (co-founder of the project):

The space was empty and charred when we first moved in. It belonged to a dancer and had a nice wooden floor, but there had been a very bad fire and so it took so long to get the insurance money that the dancer had moved out, leaving the space empty. When the insurance money came in Project *Artaud* used it to make a down payment on the building and did not repair the space, so we - the twelve of us who founded the gallery - agreed that if we could have it and use it rent free, we'd fix it up.²¹

Indeed a large part of the flexibility and independence that the early alternatives enjoyed was due in large part to the (relatively) low overhead and temporary nature of the sites involved.²²

spaces became more ‘established’ and sought after by artists wishing to exhibit the old open policies became unmanageable. And yet as late as the frenetic 80s, the director, Bill Arning, in the original democratic spirit pledged to visit the studio’s of every artist who submitted slides. His marathon studio tours were legion as were his many “discoveries” of unknown artists.

²¹ Meredith Tromble; ‘A Conversation with Robbin Henderson, Co-founder, Southern Exposure’, *Artweek*, Vol. 25, June 9, 1994, p. 15.

²² Many alternative spaces later sought to remain true to this original mission to stay “lean and mean” by launching “gypsy” or guerrilla projects without a set place of operation. Here the ‘alternative space’ was a kind of mobile site. Examples include the Temporary Contemporary in Baltimore which mounted exhibitions in sites around Baltimore that

Though the alternative spaces declared themselves to be concerned not with “the ideas of the marketplace but the marketplace of ideas,”²³ the realities of growth and the efforts to create a sustained project led to concerns with funding sources. Though funded largely by the resident artists, even the FLAT gallery relied in part on support from the Bartel Arts Trust and the Durban Arts organization who each provided grants of R400/month and R300/month respectively.

As the decade ended, for the most part as various ‘alternative spaces’ in the United States began to become more established and to seek funding. Also, they began to rely more and more on grants from all levels of government. Ironically, an ambitious National Endowment for the Arts was established under the conservative Republican presidency of Richard Nixon, and this program called NEA provided a stable supply of government support. With this financial support the 70s alternative spaces flourished and reached a certain degree of stability. Though a more structured operation replaced the ‘free for all’ attitudes of the earlier incarnations, the programming though government sponsored was at that time surprisingly independent, that is, there was a remarkable lack of government interference in programming. (Not until the famous Mapplethorpe and Serrano debates in the mid 80s would the conservative forces in the US congress look towards government funding of the arts as a rallying point.)

By the late 70s and early 80s, the ‘alternative space’ in the United States had become a convention. The crisis these venues faced was complex in nature and ironically a result of their ‘success’. As the alternative spaces grew and budgets swelled they became more structured and their programming less flexible. They began increasingly to resemble the ‘mainstream’ venues they had once critiqued; no longer seen as ‘alternative’. Mark Gisbourne addressed this in an article for *Art Monthly* on the state of these alternative spaces in the 90s:

If alternative spaces no longer operate on the periphery, outside the mainstream, this may be due to the lateral aesthetic conditions implicit in the Post-Modern. For what once appeared clearer is now blurred by the erosion of the boundaries of where inner and outer begin and end.²⁴

In a sense, alternative practices by their very nature cannot be static and those of one generation must be re-examined, critiqued and redefined by the next. In the United States, many of the alternative practices of the 70s became the market friendly novelties for the 80s, and many of the alternative spaces of the 70s became the bloated institutions of the 90s. Even so-called radical

dealt with the specific nature of the ‘host’ site and the Nomadic Site project in Los Angeles. Both of which will be covered in more detail when alternative spaces in the 90’s are discussed in “New Alternatives.”

²³ Collette Chattopadhyay; ‘Their Way’, *Artweek*, Vol. 23, Aug 6, 1992, p.16.

²⁴ Mark Gisbourne; ‘White Columns’, *Art Monthly*, No. 175, April 1994, p. 12-14.

programming that addressed difficult political issues became within a season or two the conventional fare of major museums.

The alternative spaces of the 70s had emerged from the decade with more stable funding thanks to the NEA and matching grants from local government sources and they remained independent in terms of the content and form of their programming, but a crisis was clearly on the horizon. As Kastner points out in *Uncertain Alternatives*, alternative spaces began to resemble the larger institutions that they had originally seen themselves opposing:

With stability came more infrastructures and bureaucracy slowing down the spaces' ability to move quickly to present the most progressive, avant-garde work at the earliest possible time.²⁵

Conversly, “more aggressive political shows on topics such as sexuality, gender, reproductive rights, US foreign policy and multi-culturalism, increased efforts to reach out to the community and project spaces for young artists became familiar aspects of many **contemporary art museums**.” Practices that had been regarded as ‘alternative’ were co-opted to the mainstream. What had been ‘marginal’ found itself in the ‘center’.²⁶

The alternative spaces were criticized from the left and the right, both raising questions as to the relevance in terms of audience and programming. When studies on the effectiveness of such venues revealed a 2 - 5% art audience, which was deemed primarily “educated, affluent, and white”²⁷, ammunition was given to both sides of the debate. Conservatives in the US congress claimed that the alternative spaces and the alternative programming catered to a politicized ‘in-crowd’ and did not justify public spending. Suspicious artists wondered if publicly funded alternative spaces were no more than artificial stimulations funded by the NEA and administered by professional art bureaucrats. David Trend spoke to this suspicion when he wrote in *Afterimage*:

How can organizations, promoting supposedly ‘radical’, politically critical independent work, be associated with a branch of government? The paradox of government support is that it not only supports these structures but channels them too. A system of monetary rewards has evolved that encourages ‘professionalism’ and aesthetic definitions of what art should be.²⁸

²⁵ Jeffery Kastner; ‘Uncertain Alternatives’, *ARTnews*, June 1996, p. 120 -123

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ David Trend; ‘One Hand Clapping’, *Afterimage*, Vol.16, Summer 1988, p. 2. Trend quotes Ruby Lerner here from *Comprehensive Organizational Assistance for Artists’ Organizations*, Washington, DC, NAAO, 1988.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

Ironically the NEA came under extreme fire from the right in the early 90s when Jessie Helms, a conservative US senator from a rural southern district, attacked the NEA's (indirect) sponsorship of the so-called 'immoral' art of Mapplethorpe and Serrano.²⁹ A conservative mood led to spending cuts and unwanted hostile attention to the programs to be funded. The NEA was torn apart by the struggle, experimenting at one point with an "anti obscenity" pledge requirement for grants. By the 1990s the economic boom of the 80s was over and corporate funding in steep decline. The once well-funded NEA eliminated the 'artists organization' category and individual grants in the face of severe financial constraints and threats of censorship issues.

Others, such as writer, Marcia Tanner, added their voices to the criticism of 'alternative spaces' and accused the non-profits arts organizations of being "stagnant" and "structured on a model now two decades old." She continued:

They are neither light on their feet nor responsive to the changing art market, but rather hamstrung by public policy, funding requirements, and accountability.³⁰

Indeed, what had been perceived as radical by one generation became institutionalized by the next, but also what had set itself counter to the marketplace now found itself complicit. With the institutions transforming the notion of 'non-profit' into yet another convention, artist initiatives began to spawn commercial venues.

Spaces in the East Village seemed to embody the casual spirit of the early alternatives when, in the early 1980s, they sprung up in small storefronts in the, then cheap, seedy Lower East side neighborhood of New York City. Many were artists run, but few positioned themselves in opposition to the marketplace. Though many East Village galleries exhibited work that addressed the dynamics of 'commodification', unlike the conceptual art, land art or process based performance art of the 70s, did not through its **form** resist its own commodification. For some, which embraced the marketplace, it was an 'alternative' practice that defined itself through its rejection of what was seen as the naive idealism of the 70s. For others, a radical agenda in terms of content remained but without the same 'radical forms' of the previous generation. Venues like PPOW gallery that exhibited work that dealt with 'in your face' leftist political content, such as Sue Coe's drawings, paintings, and prints, was still a commercial gallery and operated in a modest

²⁹ "Defined by Helms, they prohibit NEA... funds from "promoting, disseminating, sponsoring, or producing materials or performances that depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs as well as promoting, disseminating, sponsoring, or producing materials or performances which denigrate the objects or beliefs of the adherents of a particular religion.'" Collette Chattopadhyay; 'Nonprofits' and the Politics of Art', *Artweek*, Vol. 26, Dec 1995, p. 15 – 16.

³⁰ Marcia Tanner; 'Hard Times for Nonprofit Spaces', *Artweek*, Vol. 24, Jan 7, 1993, p. 14 – 15.

sized space. Here the small, sometimes artist run, commercial galleries, were seen as more ‘cutting edge’ than the now ‘institutionalized’ alternatives. However, the phenomenon of the East Village ‘alternative’ gallery scene was short lived. Those galleries that survived eventually moved to larger spaces in SOHO, to become more established commercial venues. This changing position of the alternative space *vis-a-vis* commerce is articulated by Gisbourne when he writes:

By the mid-80s in the face of the East Village art boom, a decisive shift had taken place. Alternative spaces became increasingly more integrated with the commercial art ‘scene’ and their traditional role as oppositional spaces was brought into question. These venues occupied a not too dissimilar position to the SOHO based galleries to whom they became something of a feeder industry.³¹

This was in part due to the growing acceptance of what had been alternative practices into commercial venues and established museums as well as a result of changing agendas within the once ‘marginalized’ artists’ communities. Many of the East Village galleries, though engaged in ‘experimental’ work, did not necessarily position themselves in a manner that was resistant to the marketplace.

The integration of alternative spaces into the mainstream, the adoption of their approaches by mainstream institutions, the dwindling of audiences and funding crisis prompted many such as Terri Cohn to ask the question:

What is alternative about alternative spaces in the 90s? To what in fact are they alternatives?³²

The implicit question here was, how can the alternative spaces survive, how can they renew themselves? It articulated the realization that for the ‘alternative space’ to sustain itself and be truly ‘alternative’ it must constantly **re-invent** itself. What was to profoundly inform this re-invention was the realization that an ‘alternative space’ could be a temporary site, and even more radically, that it was not necessarily even a building or a geographic ‘space’, but rather a site of activity. This crisis also marked a growing awareness that the nature of any alternative space, like an alternative practice, might be a vibrant, but short life. Reinvention and renewal were indeed the key concepts, but the commitment to spontaneous expression also brought with it an appreciation for impermanence.

³¹ Mark Gisbourne; ‘White Columns’, *Art Monthly*, No.175, April 1994, p. 12 – 14.

³² Teri Cohn; ‘Collaboration, Community, Commitment: Alternative Spaces in the 90s’, *Artweek*, Vol. 26, Dec 1995, p. 12.

NEW ALTERNATIVES

One of the most significant aspects of the alternative scene is the way in which it has continued to reinvent itself...whatever is established as an option to the institutionalization of the museum or the commercial gallery structure eventually becomes “establishment” in some way, and insures-or mandates a new ‘alternatives’. When the first great wave of alternative spaces began to appear during the mid-70s, one heated topic of discussion was whether the word ‘alternative’ modified the organizational structure or the art presented by the space. Today of course, it seems that the word must qualify both. As times change, the terms that define an organization or ideas as ‘alternative’ evolve with it.³³

Emerging from the 80s, alternative spaces in the USA were faced with a critical need to change with the climate. Public funding had been cut severely and many of the alternative spaces found themselves top heavy with large staffs, cumbersome long-range programming and expensive spaces to maintain. As they had begun to resemble institutions, so the institutions had begun to offer programming that appropriated their missions.

The cultural and economic climate in which they originally cast themselves no longer exists. Artist’s organizations have watched as elements of their look, missions, and programming have been slowly adopted by larger institutions.³⁴

In the same way that an alternative practice, by definition, must continually reinvent itself; its practitioners constantly moving beyond the old art forms and looking critically at the messages they convey, the alternative space to stay vital must also evolve. With the crisis in the late 1980s, the evolution of many alternative spaces in the United States was marked by a shift back to the ‘basics’ of artists’ initiatives. For many, this was a response to the financial realities of scarce funding, but the change also spoke to what had been become a lack of the artists’ direct engagement in the conception and the running of the alternative venues and a need to explore new models for ‘alternative’ practice.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jeffery Kastner; ‘Uncertain Alternatives’, *ARTnews*, June 1996, p. 120 -123

In conversation with Meredith Tromble, Michael Damm, artist and curator/founder of San Francisco's Victoria Room, spoke to the conditions that led to the surge of artists run spaces in the 90s:

... in part a national phenomenon. It emerged in the aftermath of the 1980s collapse of the market and the decline of the non-profits (the alternative spaces of the 70s).³⁵

Consistent for most of the so called 'new alternatives' that began operating in the 90s was the rejection of what was seen as the encumbrance of boards, committees, long range programming and most of all expensive real estate. Central to the re-evaluation of the 'alternative' was also the role played by the dynamics of funding. The government and corporate funding that contributed to the growth and perhaps institutionalization of the early alternatives became scarce in the late 80s and many involved in creating 'new alternatives' expressed skepticism of the implicit controls that came with such 'support'.

There was then a need to come full circle back to the beginning. To reconnect to the original spirit, if not the form, of the alternative spaces in the 70s. Four Walls, an alternative space in Brooklyn, New York, began as a series of 'open studios' and evolved into periodic one evening exhibitions. Like many of these 'new alternatives' Four Walls largely rejected the pursuit of grants in order to operate with more flexibility and responsiveness. Mike Ballou, an artist involved with Four Walls spoke to what he saw as the incompatibility of an alternative spirit with long range planning:

We're not into this grant cycle - granting institutions require that you tell them what you are doing for the next two years, and I'm not sure that you can maintain an 'alternative' spirit and do that!³⁶

Meredith Tromble echoed the problems that were created through most large scale foundation, corporate and government funding and spoke to some of the 'flexibility' problems that plagued the established alternative spaces:

The advantages of no corporate funding is that it allows for a certain amount of 'flexibility' to deal with the immediacy of the art world in a way that larger institutions cannot (and by implication the established alternative spaces could not.) The very bureaucratic nature of established alternative

³⁵ Meredith Tromble; 'A Conversation with Michael Damm, Artist, Curator, Founder of Victoria Room', *Artweek*, Vol. 27, Jan 1996, p. 13 – 14.

³⁶ Jeffery Kastner; 'Uncertain Alternatives', *ARTnews*, June 1996, p. 120 -123

spaces required programming to be resolved one or two years in advance thus making it difficult for these structures to absorb new and subtle shifts in the artworld.³⁷

Many alternative spaces that had been founded in the 70s but had survived into the 90s were challenged to adapt to the changing climate. When in 1997, Washington DC's oldest alternative space - The Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) - was threatened with bankruptcy and closure, its board opted to return to its 70s roots. A new smaller board was formed, drastic cuts were made in staff, and most radical of all, the project vacated its posh permanent space and began again with the all-volunteer remodeling of an abandoned nightclub. The alternative space, that had swollen to be a 'mini museum' with programming two years in advance and a large staff in one of Washington's most expensive real estate neighborhoods, started all over and launched an experimental exhibition of emerging artists. Just a month before the show opened volunteers could be found ripping up beer soaked carpets and scraping layers of black paint from windows. This rebirth affirmed the claim that an alternative space must die or be reinvented in order to remain 'alternative'.³⁸

Indeed, many new alternative spaces sought to remain true to the original spirit of 'alternative practice' by staying '**lean and mean**'. This was achieved not only through a return to flexible, more responsive programming but also by rethinking the notion of **space** in 'alternative space'.

Michael Floss, in *San Francisco Web: New Alternatives*, points out that these 'new alternatives' "require a new type of site".³⁹ As the most pressing constraint for many had been that of maintaining a permanent piece of 'real estate', many of the new venues moved out from under this burden by launching 'gypsy' or guerrilla projects without a set place of operation; the 'alternative space' operating as a kind of mobile site.⁴⁰

³⁷ Meredith Tromble; 'A Conversation with Michael Damn, Artist, Curator, Founder of Victoria Room', *Artweek*, Vol. 27, Jan 1996, p. 13 – 14.

³⁸ I participated in this 'renovation project' at the new WPA site in Washington.

³⁹ Michael Floss; 'San Francisco Web: the New Alternatives', *Artweek*, Vol. 27, Jan 1996, p. 12 – 13.

⁴⁰ In Berlin, an explosion of activity occurred after the destruction of the 'Wall', with commercial galleries opening up in the so-called "Mitte" section of the former East Side. Significant were the large number of artists' initiatives such as open studio exhibitions, 'alternative spaces' set in spare rooms of private flats, and guerrilla 'clubs'. These included such venues as weekend long exhibitions with remarkably professional presentation standards as well as performances in obscure alleyway shed rooms or outside of nightclubs. Operating out of small room off an alleyway in the Mitte and found by following a path made by a string of blue lights, an Israeli sculptor and sound artist called Safy opened his studio as a kind of guerrilla night club called "Sniper". The programming ranged from experimental sound mixing to screenings of video and film collage. The entire experience was considered to be part of the work and Safy was quick to assert that "Sniper is not a bar or a nightclub, but an 'art project'". Indeed, it was difficult to determine what was part of the 'performance' and what was not when the doorman barked upon entry, "No dancing, no photographs, and NO GERMAN BEER!"

M. A. Greenstein, in *Edgy in Edge City - Los Angeles*, also addresses this issue of ‘home site’ by saying that for many alternative spaces in the 90s,

transience is a survival technique, proving homelessness to be a dominant mode in art and life.⁴¹

This model is echoed by David DiMichele in the same issue of *Artweek*:

The past year has brought a plethora of fresh, creative approaches to the traditional gallery formula. One has been to operate out of temporary available spaces, so that the galleries are frequently on the move.⁴²

These new alternatives spaces did not operate out of art spaces but rather in unconventional venues. Store-front windows, garages, bus stations, restaurants, private dining rooms and lounges all became sites for artists’ exchange and created what Mark van Proyen calls a “secret urban archaeology”.⁴³ This is significant in that these were sites that engaged with ‘public space’ in a manner that again moved away from the alternative space as a distinct autonomous ‘site’, and in many cases engaged in the issues of ‘context’ in the specific site.

The Temporary Contemporary, as the name suggests, was an alternative space that operated without a permanent space. This project, based in Baltimore mounted exhibitions in sites around the city that dealt with the specific nature of the ‘host’ site. These included public venues such as works in bus stops as well as wall text placed in other art institutions.

One particularly successful and provocative exhibition sponsored by the Temporary Contemporary was created out of the inspired combination of artist Fred Wilson with the conservative Baltimore Historical Society. Wilson, an African American artist, whose work deals with racial stereotypes in popular culture, was given full access the Historical Society’s archival materials. In an effective placement and combination of selected items, Wilson created new meanings via a complex layering of images and objects. A traditional ‘family portrait’ of a slave holding family was re-titled *To bring the slave child in the corner to the center of the narrative*. Shackles and elegant silver-ware were put side by side as were whipping posts and home furnishing, titled *Examples of 19th Century Metalwork* and *Examples of 19th Century Woodwork*. Wilson employed the neutral language of this conservative museum to critique itself. In this case,

⁴¹ M.A. Greenstein; ‘Edgy in Edge City’, *Artweek*, Vol. 24, April 22, 1993, p. 16 – 17.

⁴² David DiMichele; ‘Making Ends Meet’, *Artweek*, Vol. 24, April 22, 1993, p. 14 – 15.

⁴³ Mark Van Proyen; ‘Taking Up the Challenge: New Alternatives in San Francisco’, *Artweek*, Vol. 25, June 9, 1994, p. 16.

the alternative space was not a neutral site set to house exhibitions, but rather a place specifically chosen with a fully acknowledged cultural significance.⁴⁴

In South Africa, the use of a ‘loaded site’ with a specific context was explored in the *Taking Stock* exhibition at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in 1997. Curated by Marco Cianfanelli, Luan Nell and Andrea Burgener, as part of the 2nd *Johannesburg Biennale Fringe*⁴⁵, the exhibition took place in a functioning business complex on the old unused stock exchange floor. The curators described their intention in this way:

The aim of the show is that the works, both in an individual and a collective capacity, operate more as an **intervention** than as an exhibition.⁴⁶

The site was charged with obvious references to ‘commerce’, but also spoke to the obsolescence of the ‘stage’ of an exchange floor filled with brokers. It had been abandoned and replaced with a ‘virtual’ floor, where traders carried out transactions via computer. As the theme of the Biennale was *Trade Routes*, the curators of this ‘Fringe’ exhibition saw this site as a context that was particularly rich in possibilities:

We are interested in the way in which economic power and other forms of power struggle (such as gender politics and race) are connected. We feel that the JSE site has potential for the negotiation of these issues on many different levels.⁴⁷

The Los Angeles based project called Nomadic Site was another example of an alternative space that continually recreated the ‘site’ for its exhibitions, but with even less attention perhaps to the context of the site. Founded and run by a twenty-eight year old named Charles LaBelle, “talent agent, locations scout, and public relations officer” for the project, the Nomadic Site was described in this way by M.A. Greenstein writing for *Artweek*:

a roving, out of pocket, unofficial not-for-profit entity, that exists everywhere and nowhere. Here today, gone tomorrow, Nomadic site plays in the liminal zone that blurs the distinction between public and private mind.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Simon Dumenco; ‘Lost & Found’, *Baltimore City Paper*, Baltimore, May 1, 1992. P. 9 – 12.

⁴⁵ The Fringe exhibitions were unofficial venues that took place off-site in both the 1st and 2nd *Johannesburg Biennales*. In most cases these exhibitions featured artists that were not included in the main Biennale selections.

⁴⁶ Burgener, Cianfanelli, Nell; Proposal for *Taking Stock*, Johannesburg, 1997.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ M.A. Greenstein; ‘Edgy in Edge City’, *Artweek*, Vol. 24, April 22, 1993, p. 16 – 17.

In Durban, two examples of artists' initiatives addressed this notion of the 'nomadic site' in a manner that was appropriate to the South African context. One, the Community Mural Projects (CMP) created 'exhibition sites' all over the city, and another, the Transnet *Art Train*, brought a 'moving gallery' across the region between cities.

Community Mural Projects, although not an 'alternative space' as such, embodied a creative approach to both alternative practices and alternative sites. Running parallel in time to the FLAT, this non-profit organization with a mandate to "cover every wall in Durban with murals", was initially called Dream City Projects. Run by Terry-Anne Stevenson and Ilsa Mikula, CMP proved to be quite successful and soon these murals could be seen on walls all over the country.

The project began when Stevenson and Mikula organized to paint a human-rights mural (now a national monument) on Durban's old city-jail walls; and continued as they obtained funding and sites, organizing groups of artists to work on the murals. Funding came from various art organisations, corporations and the government; and artists through the African Arts Centre,⁴⁹ word of mouth, or from institutions like the Technikon. Funding included payment for participating artists. A strong relationship grew between these artists associated with the Community Mural Projects, which included Thami Jali, Joseph Manana, Mandla Blose and Jethro⁵⁰, and the FLAT regulars.⁵¹

Though each mural was made around a theme, individual interpretations were open-ended and responsive to the community's input. Peta Lee in an article from *The Sunday Tribune* quotes Mikula as saying:

We work in collaboration with about 15 artists. Where possible, we try to involve the locals by asking them what they'd like to see painted on their walls. The object is to promote peace and community awareness.⁵²

Indeed this was an important aspect of another one of their projects, the *Warwick Avenue* mural, which was commissioned by the BAT Center for the *Festival of Laughter*. Simon Manana, an artist affiliated with the Essex Road artist space, Tsietsi Matubako, a senior painting-student at the Technikon and Thomas Barry, one of the FLAT co-founders, were among the artists who worked

⁴⁹ Stevenson had previously worked at the African Art Centre for some time.

⁵⁰ I never knew Jethro's surname.

⁵¹ Interestingly, Jali and Manana, would later form the Essex Road Gallery in July of 1994. This would begin a very fruitful cultural exchange between the regulars at both galleries; each attending each other's exhibitions. Later, an extensive interview with the Essex Road artists would be published in the 2nd issue of *FLAT* Newsletter.

⁵² Peta Lee, 'They're Painting Up a Storm', *The Sunday Tribune*, Durban, May 22, 1994.



FUN RIDE: Some of the artists who transformed two railway carriages into a colourful mobile exhibition centre.

Picture: SHELLEY KJONSTAD

Top: COMMUNITY MURAL PROJECTS, 'Human Rights Mural', Old Prison Walls, Durban, 1993. CMP Postcard.

Above: TRANSNET ART TRAIN (Community Mural Projects), June 1994. This image is taken from the 'Sunday Tribune' and shows the artists who were involved with the painting, on top of the 'gallery'. These include amongst others Thami Jali (2nd), Trueman Myaka (4th), Ilsa Mikula (5th), Tsietsi Matubako (6th), Mandla Blose (7th), Thomas Barry (8th).

on the mural. Before they began, they approached the local stall-holders around the wall and asked them what kind of mural they would like to see. Mikula recalled:

They said they wanted to see themselves... so that's what we gave them.⁵³

In the *BAT Review*, the importance of art in the community is reiterated by Stevenson when she said:

It is often a way of instilling pride and a sense of belonging to the people in the area. By producing the images on a building or community hall, they have previously had no influence over; they finally put their stamp on it through their art.⁵⁴

Another project for 'taking the art out of the gallery' developed when two train carriages were the site for an exhibition. Sponsored by Transnet, and organized by Barry, the 'alternative space' was literally these carriages that were then sent from Durban to the *Grahamstown Arts Festival*. Works were installed in this 'moving gallery', which itself became a 'canvas' for Dream City Projects (Community Mural Projects), who painted the entire exterior of the carriages with a mural. Thus they created a second travelling exhibition outside the carriages, that could be seen as the train moved from Durban to its destination. Artists who painted the mural included Trueman Myaka, Tsietsi Matubako, Blose, Jali, Mikula, Manana, and Barry.

Stevenson and Barry's collaborative efforts continued after the *Grahamstown Arts Festival* with the curated exhibition, *Emerging from the Kingdom*, a Fringe exhibition at the *Ist Johannesburg Biennale*. The Fringe exhibitions⁵⁵ were conceived of as off site 'alternative' venues to the official Biennale. *Emerging from the Kingdom* was one that comprised solely of artists from Kwa-Zulu Natal.

With unconventional venues, a dynamic is created when art is placed in a site that does not necessarily operate as an autonomous safe 'art space'. Here there is potential to engage the public directly. This can be an act which is developed with the full participation of the community, as with the murals projects and the Transnet train. However, it can also be an action that sparks controversy. The utilization of sites such as store-front windows or other public sites may confront an unwilling viewer and draw criticism and even censorship. This is an important aspect not only

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Peter Engblom (ed); *BAT Review*, Durban, 1994.

⁵⁵ Mentioned above in the context of the *Taking Stock* exhibition.

of 'new alternative spaces' but also 'new alternative practices'; work that moves out of the gallery and intrudes into the viewer's 'real world' in an aggressive manner. As a strategy in performance work, it blurs the distinction between art and life.

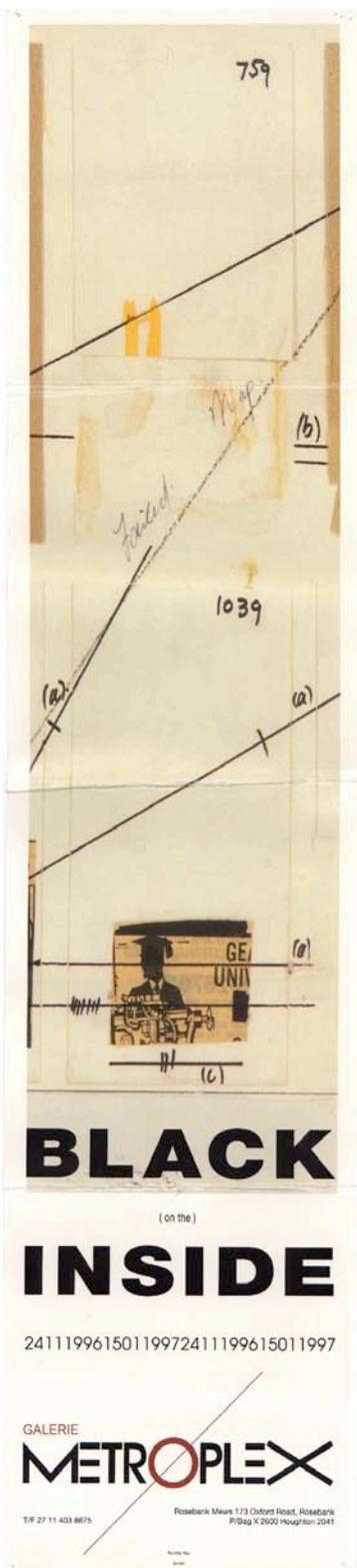
Clint Blagwell, an artist in Richmond (USA) worked independent of any gallery support with a group of collaborators to create performance works at various sites. In working class diners around the city, he and his co-performers staged 'conversations' where they 'discussed' a 'hit job' in voices loud enough to be overheard by other customers. In another work, he staged an event in a posh business district where he was chased, caught and dragged through the streets on a noon workday by well-dressed businessmen. In both 'performances' the stage was in the public but unlike 'street theater', did not set itself apart as 'fiction'. What resulted was an intrusion into the viewer's space both spatially and psychologically.

In Nomadic Sites's *Private And Public Pleasures*, a store-front display by five women artists in an old beauty salon in Hollywood, a blatant treatment of sexual issues led ultimately to censorship. Critics of the project voiced objections that were not aimed so much at the content of the work, as to the fact that the installation was in a "very public context" where "people had no choice but to see it". Though they acknowledged the implicit irony in repressing images that were about the repression of women, critics still regarded the display of controversial work in the 'public space' of a window front as offensive. Diane Mark-Walker, in her critique of *The Private and Public Pleasures* exhibition, addressed the need to consider how art functions in a public space:

Ironically it is the very extent to which *Private and Public Pleasures* merges with the surrounding territory that subverts and undermines its power. It would not be patronizing to suggest that these installations are too conceptually based and too rooted in the vocabulary of art world gender discourse to address a non-art world audience meaningfully... I can only conclude that *Pleasures* is a private toy in a public place.⁵⁶

Indeed, as Mark-Walker points out, when alternative practices shift from galleries into public spaces and the 'alternative space' is no longer a gallery space but a kind of 'appropriated site' there becomes a pressing need to explore artforms that engage the public in meaningful ways. She addresses the concern that the shifting of an artwork from the gallery out into the world must be done in a way that is mindful of how it is to engage that world.

⁵⁶ Diane Mark-Walker; 'Private & Public Pleasures', *Artweek*, Vol. 24, April 22, 1993, p. 17.



An example of a ‘store-front alternative’ that merges with its surroundings in South Africa is Galerie Metroplex. Opened in the mid-90s, it operates out of two storefront windows in a mall in Rosebank, Johannesburg. One exhibition, *TFI: Techno Factory Invention*, a display of selections from founder and curator Warren Seibriz’s rare vinyl collection, is described by Greg Bowes in the *Mail & Guardian* in this way:

This is possibly the most desirable shopfront I’ve ever seen, but seemingly without a shop. It can’t be for the Chinese supermarket next door because the display consists of a stunning array of rare and collectable techno records, and it can’t be for dance music outlet and DJ hangout Acid Dog/Liquid Records, because that’s in a completely different corner of Rosebank’s bustling shopping mecca. Warren Siebriz’s Galerie Metroplex, two windows between two malls, could easily pass for a shopfront.⁵⁷

As it is tucked away in a less traveled corridor at the rear of the shopping centre, Metroplex’s intended relation to ‘public space’ is somewhat obscure. This odd location is perhaps a reflection of its founder’s eccentricities. There is no staff and no office: only a mysterious phone number, fax and private mail-bag address. It is as if Seibriz, notoriously elusive, unlike his American counterparts, took on the project of even eliminating the curator (himself) from public view; thus establishing an uneasy relationship between the project and the audience.

⁵⁷ Greg Bowes; ‘Emporio High-Techno’, *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, Jan 10, 1997.



An invitation to Metroplex's 'Cycle 33', Oct 1997.

Opposite: A poster for the Neil Goedhals, posthumous exhibition, 'Black (on the) Inside', at Metroplex, Nov 1996.

The strategies of the so called ‘New Alternatives’ not only challenged the notions of what is an alternative gallery exhibition space with projects that operated out of temporary sites or unconventional public spaces, but also questioned the notion of what length an exhibition might run. Though performance artists had always tested the notions of conventional duration (compressing a work to a spontaneous single gesture or stretching it to involve weeks and even months), visual artists, out of necessity, began to question standard exhibition calendars. Many expressed frustration with the standard exhibition run and challenged that convention. Robert Gunderman of Food House in Los Angeles challenged the convention of month long venues by saying:

Its fucked up, this unwritten rule book by which galleries abide, the group of artists they represent, the month long exhibitions. I don't know where it came from but its something we're not interested in adhering to. Its just the same old boring pattern, so we try to mix things up as much as we can by showing film, music, performance.⁵⁸

The one-day exhibition format was a creative way of addressing the need for flexible temporary venues and liberated the organizers from staffing demands. This brought with it interesting possibilities for new sites as well as a ‘performance’ aspect to the exhibition.

Another example of an artist’s initiative without a permanent site that tackled conventional exhibition time frames was the *Movable Feast* in Richmond (USA). Once a month an exhibition was set up for one night with an evening of performances, poetry readings, or other presentations. Marisa Telleria-Diez, an artist from Nicaragua studying at the Virginia Commonwealth University, was an organizer for what began as an effort to facilitate more dialogue between artists and writers and grew into a regular ‘one night exhibition/event’ in the shifting available spaces.

Like the FLAT, many new alternatives ran without set hours of operation. Food House opened three days a week, thus allowing each of its three partners to gallery sit one day a week. Four Walls in Brooklyn mounted one-night exhibitions. In San Francisco’s last surviving Woolworth’s, the day before its demolition, an artist group staged a one-day exhibition. In another project called *One Night Stand*, the site was a seedy hotel room and the exhibition ran for 24-hours.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ David DiMichele; ‘Making Ends Meet’, *Artweek*, Vol. 24, Jan 7, 1993, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Michael Floss; ‘San Francisco’s Web: New Alternatives’, *Artweek*, Vol. 27, Jan 1996, p. 14 – 15.

As was the case with many of the early alternatives, which began as ‘open studio’ events or as an outgrowth/extension of the artist’s own work and living space, alternatives in the 90s in the United States and South Africa included these venues where private life became public display. Venues in South Africa that operated as a kind of ‘outgrowth’ of private space included not only the FLAT, but the FIG gallery in Johannesburg and Essex Road Gallery in Durban.

The First International Gallery (FIG) operated out of a number of sites, including its most recent location, a former corner-store in a residential part of Troyeville; and like the FLAT Gallery in Durban, was one of a number of alternative spaces that appeared in South Africa in the early to mid 90s. In Cape Town spaces like the Planet Contemporary Art Site, operating below a bar in Observatory, and Gallery Mau Mau, situated on the first floor of a downtown office block, blossomed with the ‘post-apartheid appeal’ of the Mother City. Denis Mair in the *Mail & Guardian*, described Mau-Mau as the “newest art site for small revolutions, an establishment that pushes fringe exposure for renegade artists”.⁶⁰ The Planet Contemporary, according to Sue Williamson, was the “experimental counterpart in Cape Town to Johannesburg’s FIG Gallery.”⁶¹ By saying this she acknowledges the FIG as possibly one of the more ‘legendary’ alternative art spaces in South Africa.

In one performance at the FIG, the Mud Ensemble presented an experimental, multi-media show, that included live music as well as video and ‘installation’ elements that co-opted the entire gallery - both its public and private spaces. Charl Blignaut, of the *Mail and Guardian* wrote, “The band members subtly act out petty domestic scenes throughout their shows.”⁶²

The main exhibition space at the FIG housed the band and the very crowded audience, but in a small back bedroom, singer Marcel van Heerden sat ‘lamenting’ on a bed, while a live feed of this ‘scene’ was shown back in the main room. At one point in the performance, Juliana Venter, lead vocalist for the ensemble, took a shower in the Gallery’s bathroom. As Van Heerden sang in the main space, Thomas Barry⁶³ filmed her naked, wet body - feeding this image live to the audience. A large window onto the shower had been opened, also making her physically visible to the audience. The performers, indeed, “acted out these scenes” not only in the public space of exhibition rooms of the gallery, but also the private space of the bedroom and bathroom. The audience moved from room to room, or gazed at the monitors. Like voyeurs the viewers watched ‘private acts’ in a space where public and private were blurred.

⁶⁰ Denis Mair, ‘Lesson One: Manipulate Mainstream’, *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, Nov 22, 1996.

⁶¹ Sue Williamson, Ashraf Jamal; *Art in South Africa - the Future Present*, Claremont, David Philip, 1996, p. 11.

⁶² Charl Blignaut, ‘Stirring up a Muddy Brew’, *Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, Aug 23, 1996.

Established in 1994, The Essex Road Gallery in Durban began as a living space before acting also as an exhibition space. According to one of its founders, Thami Jali; his involvement began when he returned from Johannesburg and moved into a commune that was owned by Paul Mikula at 38 Essex Road. Amongst the occupants living there at that time were artists who were involved in the “Dream City” murals including Joseph Manana, Simon Manana, Jethro, Ilsa Mikula and Isaac Sikhakhane. With Jali, the occupants decided to establish an exhibiting space in the lounge much like the FLAT. In an interview for the *FLAT* newsletter, Jali talked about this:

I came back from Johannesburg and got a room in Essex Road commune. I suggested to the artists here that we use this central common space (pointing to the lounge) for something as it wasn't being used.⁶⁴

The house provided not only a place to live, and an exhibition space, but was a supportive environment for artists who were not living in Durban. In that same interview Manana and Jali spoke to this and to the relationship between Essex Road and the FLAT. Kendall Buster, a visiting artist from the United States, also took part in the discussion.

Manana: Some years ago if one came to town for an exhibition from the townships and you could not get transport back home then you knew that you could come here and stay overnight.

Jali: That is the whole spirit of Essex Road Gallery. The FLAT Gallery also played an important role in a sense because when we went there we thought, “well here it is: a very similar set up!” Straight away we wanted to find some working relationship with the FLAT Gallery. Although, the FLAT was catering for a more or less different target group, but the essence of our ideas overlapped.

Buster: How did they overlap? What would you say you guys had in common?

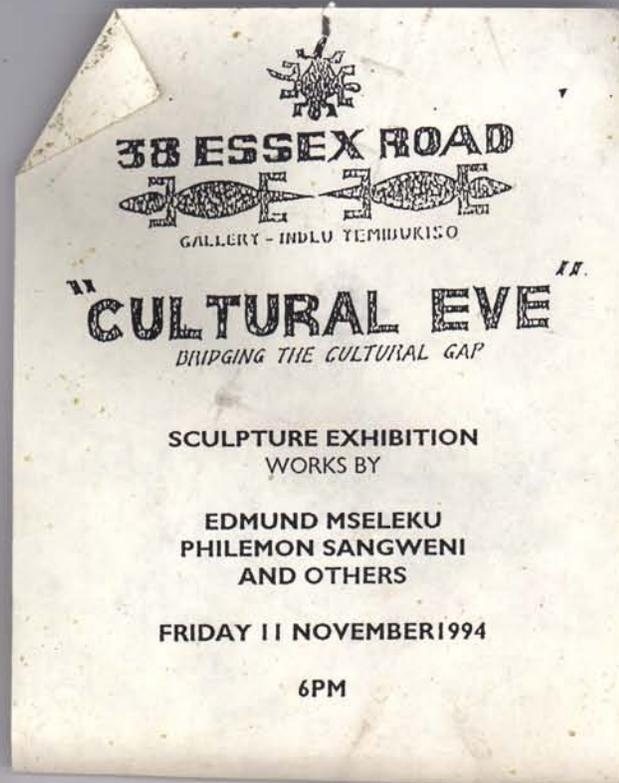
Allen: Well the fact that we knew that each other existed is important. We would complement each other, go to each other's exhibitions

Jali: When people came here we wanted them to feel at home - we didn't want to impose our ideas on them. We wanted a forum where people can actually talk about art and things in general to let them know that artists are ordinary people. Because in the townships for instance people think artists are freaks [laughter] or lazy!

⁶³ Once the FLAT had disbanded in Durban, Barry moved to Johannesburg and joined the Mud Ensemble as their 'conceptual' coordinator.

⁶⁴ Jali, Manana, Sikhakhane, Buster, Allen; 'Essex Road Gallery', *FLAT*, Issue 2, Durban, FLAT, July 1995.

An invitation to an exhibition at Essex Road (Nov 1994) and a newspaper cutting from the 'Sunday Tribune' (July 1995) showing Thami Jali with the 'Essex Road Exhibition' at the NSA Gallery. This was one example of an 'established' gallery supporting artists from another gallery. The NSA itself promoted the fact that it was showing a group of artists from an 'alternative space'.



Jali: We saw our exhibitions as an evening of culture, art, music and even alcohol played an important part. People could express themselves in any way – singing, dancing. If they wanted to stay all night, till morning, they could.

Allen: The FLAT was pretty much like that sometimes. It turned into complete madness.
[Laughter]

Jali: And its OK to have something like that. Some of the friendships that started between the two galleries were very good I think. That’s what we need. Even if we were to interpret this as some sort of political statement.⁶⁵

Indeed the ‘political’ nature of many alternative practices can be seen not only through the issues addressed in the work, but also by the way that alternative spaces created sites of exchange across cultural barriers both in South Africa and the United States.

However, artists in both countries in the 90s, also questioned the strategies of the previous generation, which they perceived as a kind of dogmatic ‘political correctness’. As described by Kendall Geers in an essay in *Spring is Rebellious*, many South African artists sought to address ‘political’ concerns through means that were not just “politically correct” statements, but also “avant-garde” critical works in venues inside and outside of the gallery.⁶⁶ In one ‘performance’ Geers greeted President Nelson Mandela in Berlin wearing a *Mandela mask*.⁶⁷ Artist Minette Vari confronted issues of identity in terms of gender and race by using computer generated ‘self-portraits’ to transform herself into a black woman for a billboard display. Though sponsored by the ‘established’ Pretoria Art Museum, the work mimicked a standard advertisement, and was set up in a public space. In another work, for the exhibition, *Hitch-Hiker*, at the Generator Art Space, an enigmatic androgynous image of Vari ‘as a man’, served as the ‘official’ poster and newspaper advertisement for the exhibition and was therefore in this way disseminated far beyond the gallery.

In these and other works, artists in the 90s in South Africa, not only stretched the definition of ‘performance’, but co-opted ‘public space’ as an alternative venue. They also began to address the difficult questions of race and gender in a visual language that sought to challenge the clichés of activist art and drew fire from both left and right. Sparking enough controversy to

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Kendall Geers; ‘Competition with History: Resistance and the Avant-Garde’, *Spring is Rebellious*, Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1990, p. 43 – 46. More about this collection of essays in the *FLAT File*

⁶⁷ In the ‘performance’, Geers wore a *Mandela mask* to meet President Mandela at an opening in Berlin. Shaking his hand, the President greeted him by saying “I recognize you,” and signed the mask. Sue Williamson, Ashraf Jamal; *Art in South Africa - The Future Present*, Claremont, David Philip, 1996, p. 58.

he doesn't have too many ideas. He...
 Christmas party season approaching, this will sell. So
 will tinsel, custard and fruit-flavoured wines. 'Nuff said.

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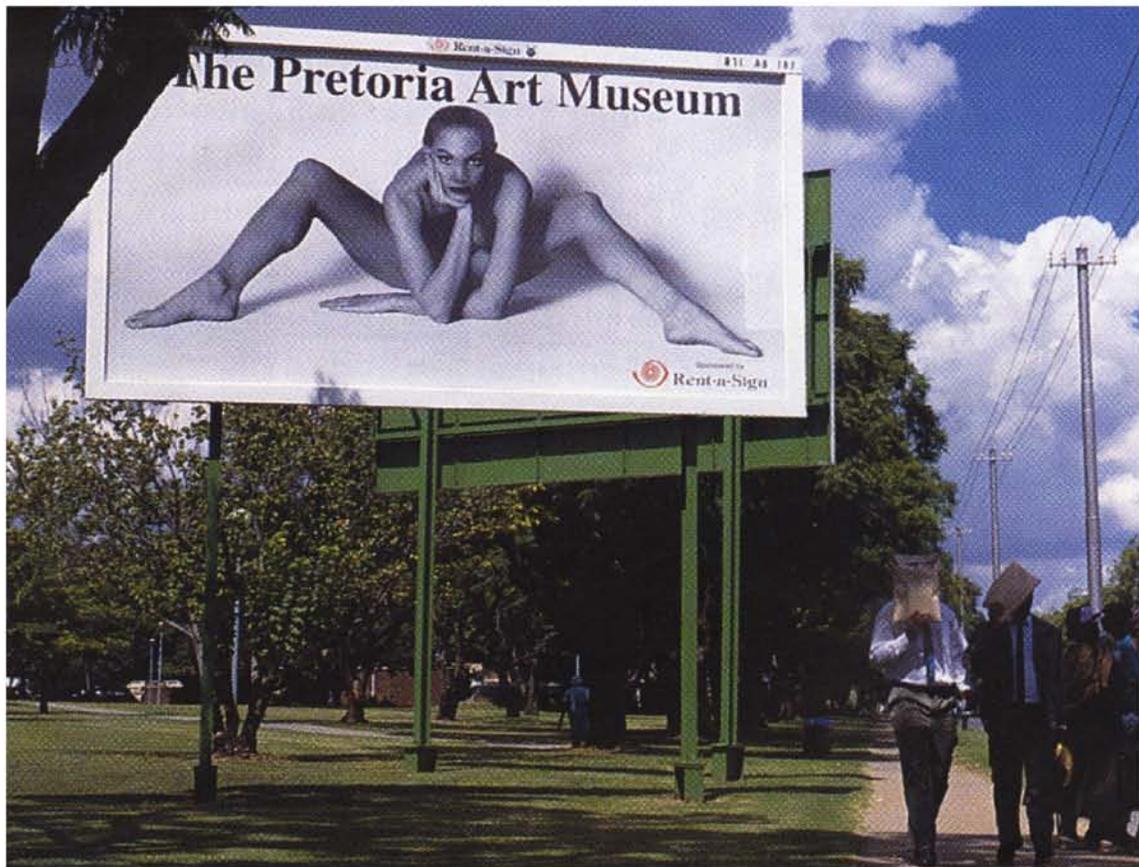
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HITCH-HIKER

Simon Allen (SA)	Willem Boshoff (SA)
Eugenio Dittborn (Chile)	Jimmie Durham (USA/Belgium)
Abric Fourie (SA)	Kendell Geers (-)
Kay Massam (SA)	Stephen Hobbs (SA)
Mosheloa Lami (SA)	Kim Liberman (SA)
Pat Muboko (SA)	Guillaume Naudin (USA/Mocambique)
Olu Cimbibe (Nigeria/USA)	Robyn Qili (SA)
Piet H. Naar (SA)	Tracey Rose (SA)
702 Talk Radio (SA)	Joachim Schoorl (SA)
Minnette VAN (SA)	Jeremy Wafer (SA)

GENERATOR ART SPACE
 AFRICUS INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART
29 NOV '96 THROUGH UNTIL '97
 CURATED BY CLIVE KELLNER
 838 6407
 ADJACENT TO THE ELECTRIC WORKSHOP - NEWTOWN CULTURAL PRECINCT

Above: MINETTE VARI, 'Hitch-Hiker' advertisement in the Mail & Guardian, 1996.
 Below: MINETTE VARI, 'Self Portrait I', 1995. (This image is taken from Sue Williamson's 'Art in South Africa - The Future Present', 1996.)



reaffirm the power of art to provoke dialogue around important cultural issues.⁶⁸

In the United States were artists whose independent gallery initiatives offered a resistance to what they perceived as the ‘didactic’ practices of some early alternatives. Michael Bulka, a Chicago based critic writing for the *New Arts Examiner* spoke to this viewpoint which regarded ‘political’ art **itself** as a convention:

Overall, the work [these] galleries show tends to avoid the most popular clichés of empowerment and tokenism. This is partly a result of the galleries’ self-positioning outside the grant system that rewards ideological conformity, with the values of the moment, but also because they simply avoid art with an overtly political message. They choose to present... work that attempts to examine, to enrich the nature of art, not simply to stretch this definition to include political gesture. This is, of course, not to say that these... artists are uninterested in real social problems... Their view tends to be less didactic and more open to interpretation.⁶⁹

Some artists, at this time, even articulated what they regarded as an alternative practice by distancing themselves from what they saw as a convention of ‘political art’, by returning to ‘art for art’s sake’. In language that perhaps sounded almost reactionary to a generation who had struggled just a decade earlier to bring social and political agenda’s to the art debate, these artists as described by Bulka seemed to be re-embracing a modernist agenda:

While the work in the galleries recognizes the influence of larger political and social realities, it is basically art for art’s sake, however unpopular that may be amidst the current appetite for ‘multi-cultural awareness’.⁷⁰

This of course is not to say that ‘politically charged’ alternative practices did not flourish, but their relation to the ‘mainstream’ was less clearly defined. In *Conversations Before the End of Time*, Suzi Gablik describes two collaborative partnerships that give a sense of how wide was the

⁶⁸ Heated debate was ignited when Candice Breitz, a New York based, South African artist, responded to comments made by Geers (*The Star - Tonight*, March 19, 1997) in reference to an exhibition catalogue essay by Okwui Enwezor (*Contemporary Art from South Africa*, Riksstilling, Oslo, Norway). In the article, Geers ‘reports’ on the essay by saying that Enwezor criticizes white artists “who continue to exploit the perceived silence of black Africans by speaking on their behalf, an action that is as patronizing as it is essentially racist.” Indeed, Enwezor, addresses the “resurgent emergence of the black subject as a popular image in all forms of representation in contemporary South Africa” and criticizes the “unreflexive white cultural practitioners unblinkingly intent on representing black subjectivity at the margins of cultural and aesthetic discourse.” Speaking specifically to what he sees as problematic in work by Pipa Skotnes, Penny Siopis, Lien Botha and Breitz among others, he says: “This calls into question what images in a decolonizing South Africa should look like, and who has the right to use which images, and what the authorizing narrative ought to be.” This essay and newspaper review catalyzed a series of correspondences around issues of ‘representation of the Other.’ As the debate enlarged, a call was made for contributions to a publication, *Grey Matters*. More about this in the *Post-FLAT* section.

⁶⁹ Michael Bulka, ‘Beyond the Comfort Zone’, *New Art Examiner*, Vol. 20, Dec 1992, p. 16 – 19.

span of politically motivated ‘alternative’ practices and how gray were the definitions of what constituted an ‘alternative venue’. In one project, sponsored by the Whitney Museum for the 1993 Biennale, Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco presented themselves “in cages outside the museum, posed as aboriginal inhabitants.” In another, far from the ‘art world’, ecologically minded artists Rachel Dutton and Rob Olds stopped “consuming to make art” and “took to the woods”, composing a short contract that their work would “never be sold, but given away”.⁷¹ From the invasion (through invitation) of an established museum, to an obscure performance where life and art merge, many artists still sought to address social and political issues within an uneasy relationship to the ‘institution’ and to the conventions of art marketing.

One might still ask the question, “Alternative to **what?**”, and it is pertinent to consider that what is the radical practice of one generation can become for the next a stale convention. Bulka has this critical word for what he sees as the ‘old alternative practices’, but looks towards the new by saying:

The not-for-profit spaces were vital and useful when they were founded, but as they continue to show the same unintentionally seamless work they become increasingly artifacts of their time. **Uncomfortable spaces represent today’s mutations.**⁷²

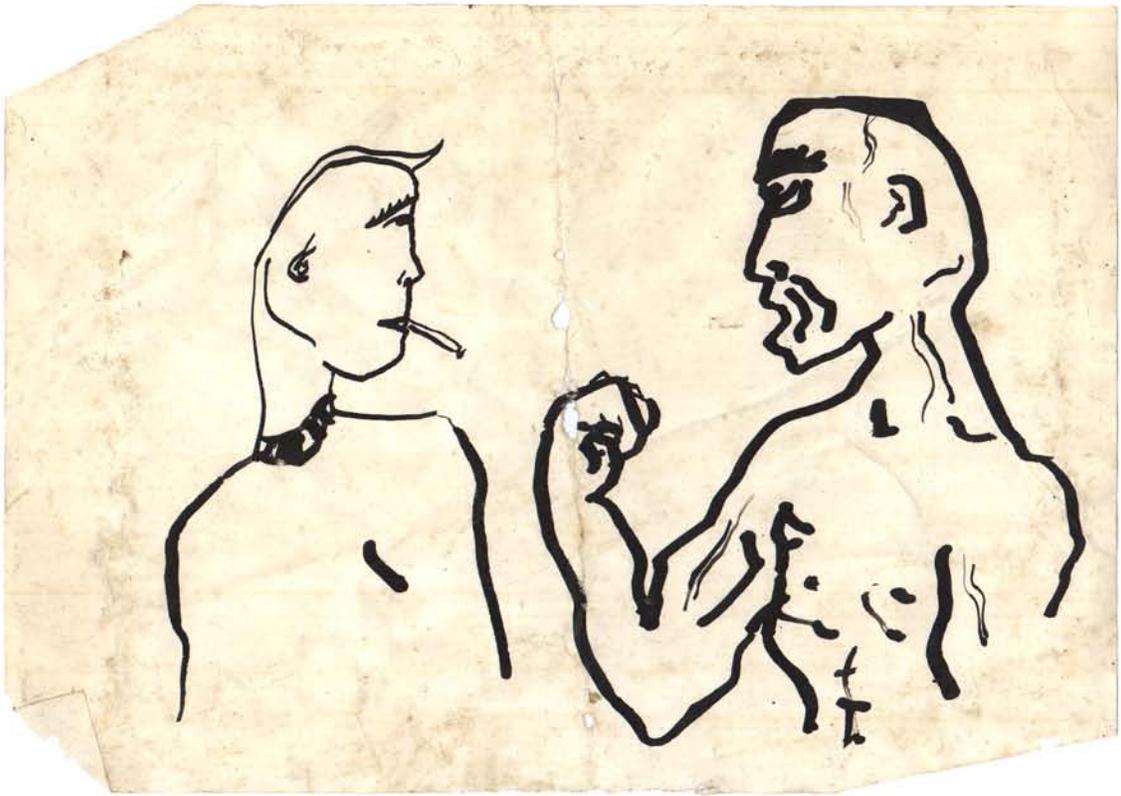
By returning to the ‘artists initiative’ roots of alternative practice, the ‘alternative space’ in the USA emerged into the 90s with renewed purpose. For many, this meant operating with tighter budgets and temporary spaces, but interestingly the necessity of paring down brought with it a reinvention of ‘alternative practice’. Alternative spaces and alternative practices were brought ‘closer to the streets’ and with this move were reinvented.

In South Africa, the lack of a strong market and the immediacy felt by artists to express themselves within the politically charged transitional period led to many creative ‘grass roots’ initiatives, as well as explorations into new visual languages. For both, there is relevance to Bulka’s insistence that alternatives remain vital when they are ‘**uncomfortable**’.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Suzi Gablik; *Conversations Before the End of Time*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1995, p. 56 – 83 and p. 312 – 332.

⁷² Ibid.



THOMAS BARRY, Ink on paper, 1993.