

## ***THE Pre-FLAT ENVIRONMENT (1988 - 1993)***

*Everything written in the 'objective style' of 1950s social sciences or 'New Criticism' and everything written in the opaque style of post-structural discourses, now risks being read as a kind of political cover-up, hidden complicity, and intrigue on either the right or the left. Interestingly, the one path that still leads in the direction of scholarly objectivity, detachment, and neutrality is exactly the one originally thought to lead away from these classic virtues: that is, **an openly autobiographical style** in which the subjective position of the author, especially on political matters, is presented in a clear and straightforward fashion. At least this enables the reader to review his or her own position to make adjustments necessary for dialogue.<sup>1</sup>*

It is difficult to locate a single specific reason behind the creation of the FLAT Gallery, for like many creative ventures it began with equal parts of accident and design. The circumstances of a dissatisfaction with the existing exhibition opportunities and 'art scene' in Durban, a move by students to seek exhibition venues outside of the institution, an undesignated space ripe for communal use and fresh ideas from outside the area all combined to catalyze what would become the FLAT. However, it is useful to begin with a consideration of the particular cultural environment of Durban at that time.

The Community Arts Workshop (CAW) was an important artist initiative in Durban that had been founded in 1981 by Andries Botha and joined what was then a rise of community art centres around South Africa. As was the case with its counterparts in other parts of the country, the CAW was a site "where artists tried to provide opportunities for training to those denied access to apartheid institutions."<sup>2</sup> The inclusiveness of the CAW was expressed in that it was an

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<sup>1</sup> Dean McCannell in Lucy Lippard's *The Lure of the Local*, New York, New Press, 1997, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Rankin; 'Genesis Genesis', *Andries Botha – Standard Bank Young Artist Award Catalogue*, p. 6.

“alternative space... where anyone may come and work.”<sup>3</sup> The FLAT Gallery would later echo this spirit in its assertion that its mission was “to allow anyone to do anything.”<sup>4</sup>

Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to speak more fully about the Community Arts Workshop, it could in some ways be seen as an ‘alternative space’. Its primary function was not that of an exhibition site, but in terms of being a place for ‘alternative practices’, it was indeed vital. In apartheid South Africa, artistic education was denied to black South Africans, and the CAW provided not only ‘training’, but a cultural centre for the free exchange of ideas. Community art centres were important catalysts in furthering the development of an alternative culture in South Africa, through their proactive approach to education. This could be seen as the offering of an educational system that was ‘alternative’ to, or in opposition to, that of the apartheid educational institutions.

Durban’s Community Arts Workshop not only operated as an educational centre, but at the time also functioned as a site for exhibitions, as well as a weekly nightclub. Run by Helga Jansen, the club, called *Play*, was one of Durban’s earliest outlets for ‘alternative’ and punk music. It is also significant to note that the last exhibition mounted at CAW before its closing in 1988, *Artists for Human Rights*, asserted the commitment of artists to address social conditions.

At that time, a number of exhibition sites were available to artists in Durban. These included the Durban Art Gallery (DAG), the African Art Centre, the Natal Society of Arts (NSA), the Grassroots Gallery, the Elizabeth Gordon Gallery, as well as the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) Art Gallery and the Technikon Natal Art Gallery. Though these venues differed ideologically and represented a diverse range of artists, the environment of Durban itself was generally considered quite conservative. Indeed many local artists, both young and established, black and white, considered Durban to be culturally lacking. In an early funding campaign letter to the public, Mike van Graan, who would be the director of the Bartel Arts Trust (BAT) Center when it opened in 1995, challenged would be donors by speaking to this perception:

Dear friend,

They say Durban is a cultural backwater

They say nothing ever happens in Durban

And that the people of Durban are apathetic in their support of the arts.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sue Williamson; ‘Andries Botha’, *Resistance Art in South Africa*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1989, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Moe, Barry, Allen; Funding Proposal Letter to BAT, Durban, Feb 2, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Mike Van Graan; BAT public letter, Durban, Dec 23, 1994. Though seemingly ‘negative’, Van Graan’s opening remarks in this letter, do go on to say: “Here’s a chance to prove ‘them’ wrong!”

Essex Road Gallery co-founder Thami Jali, in an interview in the second issue of *FLAT*<sup>6</sup>, had this to say:

One thing I have always been concerned about in Durban is the general lack of interest or energy. People are really apathetic. In Johannesburg people get up in the mornings and want to do something. Over the last 15 years I have lived in Johannesburg for a number of long periods and I see things happening. And it is not just white artists exhibiting or organizing something, but people of all racial groups. Here in Durban, people tend to wait for other people to organize exhibitions for them.<sup>7</sup>

We as young artists and students in Durban were fully aware of this “apathy”, and yet, were also aware of the need to combat it through action. For us, it seemed, that any ‘lack’ in an art community lay in the notion that this ‘community’ existed and functioned independently of ones own efforts. Additionally, for many students and young artists there was a mistaken presumption that opportunities would simply ‘be provided’ once one had left the comforts of the institution. A sculpture graduate from Natal Technikon, Greg Streak, spoke to this in an interview in the first issue of *FLAT*:

I don't think that post institutional realities are made clear enough nor are they emphasized enough. Within your study years there is an enormous infrastructure available to you. You become over-dependant on the facilities, the moral support, the collective energies, all of which I think are positive attributes but which can undermine your independence. Some further steps need to be introduced to soften the blow from Technikon into the realities of the ‘big-wide-world’... There are certainly many talented young artists that just disappear because of a sense of alienation, as a result of a lack of support.<sup>8</sup>

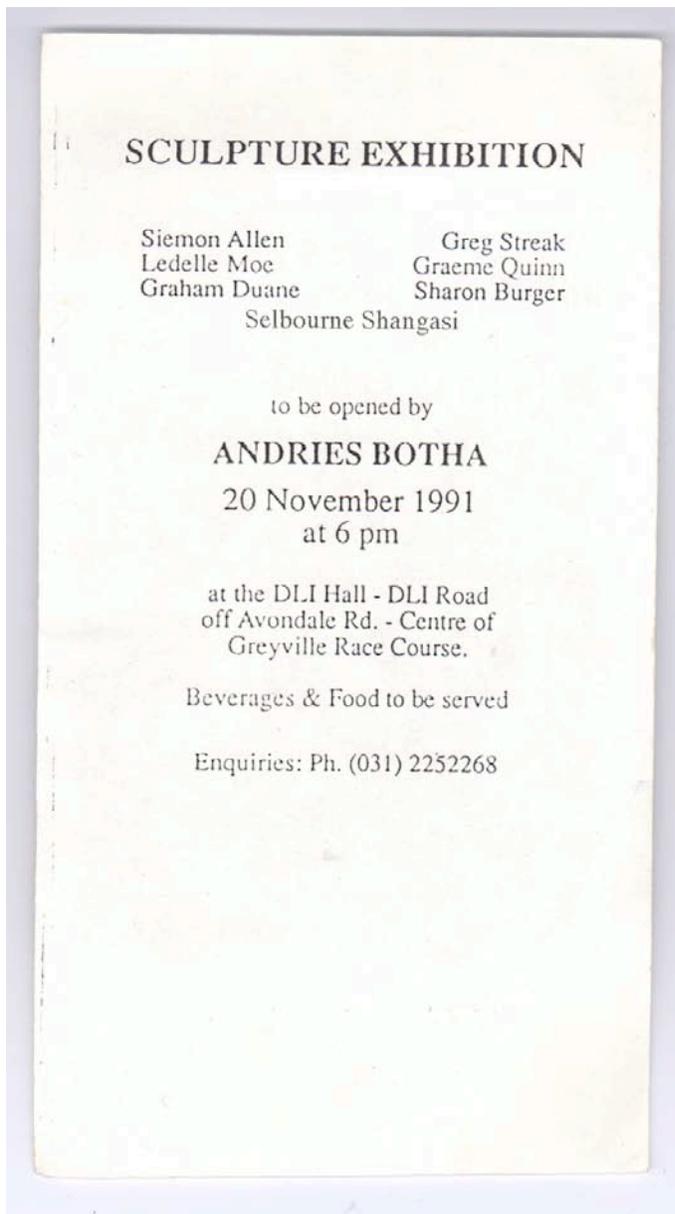
In an effort to combat this perceived apathy and with the realization that as students we needed to take more responsibility for our creative endeavors beyond the institution, many of us made an active commitment to seek-out off-campus (alternative) spaces to exhibit our portfolio and thesis shows. In 1990, Ledelle Moe, Joe Gilson, and myself exhibited our end of term work in the disused Old Library Building on campus before its demolition. The liberating experience of

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<sup>6</sup> *FLAT* was a post-FLAT Gallery, monthly newsletter which was established in 1995 to look critically at contemporary issues within the arts in Durban. One thousand copies of each of the first two issues were printed and distributed. The third issue, although completed, unfortunately never got to the printing stage and hence was never available. See all three issues in the Post-FLAT section of this document.

<sup>7</sup> Jali, Manana, Sikhakhane, Buster, Allen; ‘Essex Road Gallery’, *FLAT*, Issue 2, Durban, FLAT, July 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Streak, Allen; ‘An interview with Greg Streak’, *FLAT*, Issue 1, Durban, FLAT, June 1995.

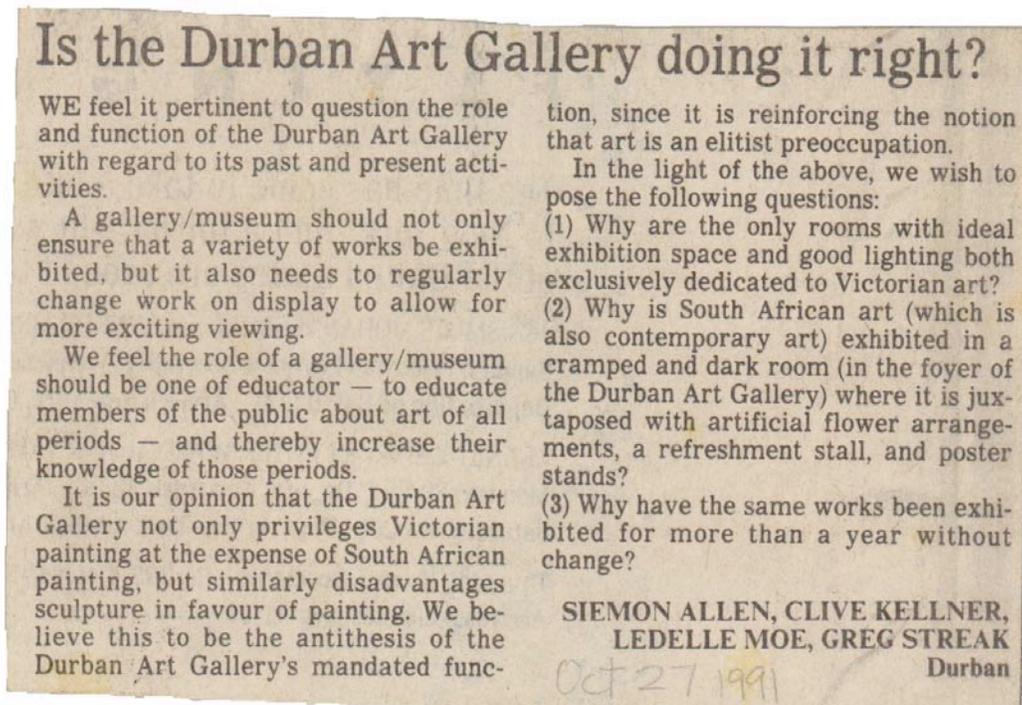


An invitation to an exhibition opened by Andries Botha at the DLI Hall, 1991.

seeing our work outside of the academic environment, and the opportunity this offered for us to investigate more experimental approaches affirmed for us a desire to continue our search for off-campus space. In 1991 Moe and myself exhibited off-campus in an 'abandoned' Electricity Building on Alice Street. This space at that time had just become the home of the Stable Theatre and was the site of much creative and 'alternative' activity. Again that year, a group of 3rd year students from the sculpture department, including Streak, Moe and myself installed a massive exhibition at the Durban Light Infantry (DLI) Hall. "No-one," according to Clive Kellner "had up until that point thought of exhibiting their final shows outside of the confines of the Technikon".<sup>9</sup> The rise of the FLAT was an extension of these endeavors, and indeed the off-campus-exhibition phenomenon that developed in the years to follow at the Technikon could be seen in some sense as a direct outgrowth of such activities.

<sup>9</sup> In conversation with Clive Kellner in Johannesburg, 1997. Kellner was a painting student at the Technikon and had graduated in 1990.

Our initiative to create independent off-campus exhibitions for our student work was not the only example of a growing ‘pro-active’ spirit. In 1991 Kellner, along with Streak, Moe and myself wrote a letter to *The Sunday Tribune* expressing our contempt for what we saw as the unresponsiveness of the Durban Art Gallery to both contemporary art and to younger artists.<sup>10</sup>



Letter to the Editor, *Sunday Tribune*, October 27, 1991.

Though the criticism was directed at the city's primary art institution, it also spoke to a broader sense of frustration with the general conservatism of the region's cultural institutions and represented the germination of a generational split that was blooming in Durban. Vusi Mchunu, director of the BAT centre, in a later interview with Jenah McCarthy located this frustration in what he called a battle between the ‘old guard’ and the ‘young or emerging artists’. In the interview, in her paper, *The Status of Young Artists in Durban - Conflict and Creativity* (1997) Mchunu says:

<sup>10</sup> This letter would not have been possible without the assistance of art critic Dan Cook, who was also an art-history lecturer at the Natal Technikon, and who had similar views on the subject at that time (and knew someone at the newspapers.)

People are scared to lose their positions, to lose face, to lose money, They fool themselves and remain in their cocoons... The old guard, those people are stuck up, rusted old zoo material... they belong in the zoos, to the museums, where we can one day go and laugh and say “that’s what we used to be!” Take to the streets with banners, with pickets and cry “we aren’t being recognized,” BUT say: “We’re doing it!”<sup>11</sup>

This call by Mchunu to “do it” was indeed resonant with the challenge that we as younger artists had felt to “make something happen”. For us, at that time, this was the desire to work in an experimental creative manner, and to be open to the exploration of installation, performance, and other “alternative practices”.

For alternative practices to exist, a space is not always a necessity, but a site can be an important vehicle in providing a common place where things can happen. In 1993, my first year out of the Technikon, I continued to work independently, but maintained contact with fellow students. When Ledelle Moe and Niël Jonker, (fourth and third year sculpture students respectively) invited me to share a large apartment on Mansfield Road near campus, I agreed to a partnership. At the time, I was not in need of a place to live, but welcomed the opportunity to continue the sense of community and support that I had enjoyed at the Technikon. ‘My designated room’ on Mansfield Road was the front room or lounge. As it remained ‘unused’, this room evolved into a kind of communal space. It all began in a very modest way with artists coming over, getting drunk and joking about doing crazy things.

Also, at this time an infusion of new ideas to the area came with the arrival of artists from outside Durban. Thomas Barry (Pretoria), Carol Gainer (Nelspruit), Rhett Martyn (Johannesburg), Niël Jonker (Oudtshoorn), Aliza Levi (Johannesburg) and Etienne de Kock (Pretoria) were artists, who with others would bring to the local art community a wider perspective and prove to be essential participants in the growth of the FLAT phenomenon.

The space that would become the FLAT served as a communal meeting spot for the first four months of our occupancy. It generally remained empty and ‘unused’ and was not a site for exhibition until Adrian Hermanides in October of 1993, approached Moe, Jonker and myself with a proposal. Hermanides, a third year Fine Art student at the Technikon asked if he could present his portfolio for a critique in the space. We agreed to his proposal and he installed his work in

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<sup>11</sup> Jenah McCarthy; *The Status of Young Artists in Durban - Conflict and Creativity* , Paper presented at the S.A.A.A.H. Annual Conference, 1997.

what was then our ‘empty room’.<sup>12</sup> Lecturers came to the site and a critique was staged. Although the space was off-campus, its close proximity to the Technikon was convenient for visits by staff and students. This location would prove to be a contributing factor in the complex mutual exchange that developed between students and lecturers from the Technikon and the FLAT initiative. In a sense, the relationship between the two was uniquely symbiotic, operating in a manner that was at once both oppositional and complementary. The FLAT drew from Technikon for both artists and audience, and the established structure of the institution provided a kind of counterpoint to which the FLAT could ‘play off’. Additionally, the Technikon relied on the FLAT to propagate a healthy experimental environment.<sup>13</sup>

That same week an important conversation began when we at the Mansfield Road apartment met informally with other artists. Nancy Thomson, Lloyd Meintjies, as well as Barry, Gainer, Jonker, Moe, and myself discussed the possibility of using this empty room as a permanent exhibition space. An ad-hoc show, prompted by Meintjies, was ‘performed’ there and then, and over the next few days, discussions and arguments arose concerning the naming of the space. It is my recollection that Thomson coined the simple word – “FLAT” - as it was a flat. Barry, who was not a student at the Technikon and who had not had the opportunity to formally show his work in Durban, opted for an opening the following week.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, an alternative space in Berlin, active in the summer of 1997 was called just that: “...in our Empty Room”. Here, a couple designated an extra room in their flat for ongoing exhibitions. These and other initiatives were an important component in the vibrancy of the former East-Side, ‘Mitte’ art scene.

<sup>13</sup> The 1995 official Fine Art pamphlet sent out to prospective students uses the FLAT Gallery as one of the many examples of what young artists can do once they have graduated from the programme.



THOMAS BARRY, 'What is Your Responce?', 1993.

This guerilla-style project of Barry's took place late one evening near the Warwick Avenue Train Station. Sharon Burger (left to right), Barry, Allen and Moe, photographed here by Rensh Bouwer, are preparing to hang a large banner from the side of the roadway in such a way that it would be visible to the train commuters below.