

THE FLAT FILE

THOMAS BARRY

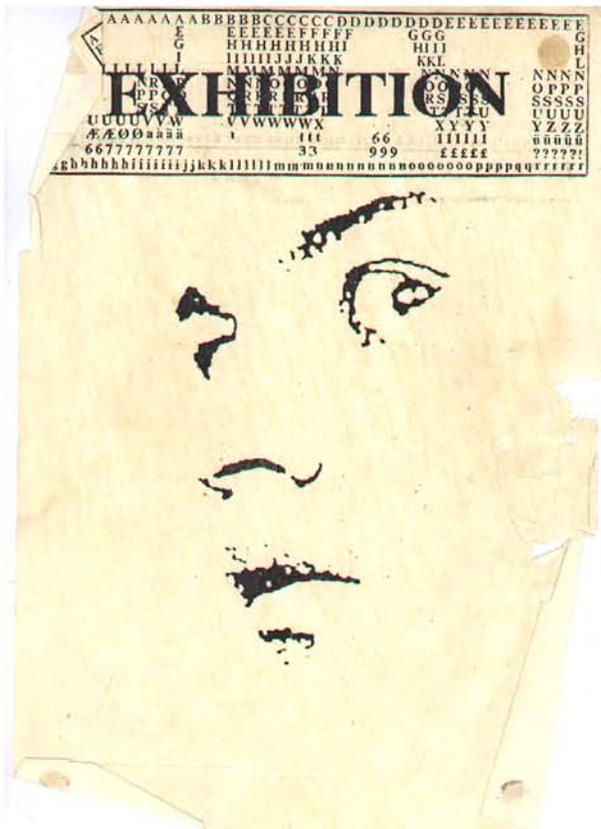
October 15, 1993

An exhibition of mixed-media drawings by Thomas Barry was the first official exhibition at the FLAT. Barry, who had studied Fine Art in Pretoria, had come to Durban after an invitation by Andries Botha in 1992. He met and became affiliated with artists and students at the sculpture department through the Technikon Bronze Foundry, where he worked. After Hermanides completed his critique and an interest began to swell to continue exhibitions at the space, Barry expressed his desire to exhibit work that he had recently made in Pretoria. Within a week, an opening date was set, posters were made and distributed, and work was installed. Barry's sister, Hedwig, a Johannesburg-based artist at that time, was by coincidence visiting Durban and agreed to formally open the exhibition. This was the inaugural event for the now 'officially' named FLAT gallery. The show opened, and an alternative space in Durban was born.

Barry exhibited a collection of drawings and matchboxes. However, the presentation of these 2-D and 3-D elements was anything but conventional. Amongst the charcoal drawings were some works executed on large sections of an industrial fabric and some on 'found' roll paper. These hung free-floating, like banners, both horizontally and vertically. One panel, extended across the entire width of the main wall for a total length of about 5 meters, and on another wall hung strips from what had been a continuous drawing on a long roll of paper 20 cm wide.



Barry and Gainer 'installing' his exhibition at the FLAT, 1993.



EXHIBITION

021 452 450

6PM

FRIDAY

15 - 22

OCTOBER

MANSFIELD RD

MANOR COURT

NO 4

STAMPA 209257

FRIDAY 15 OCTOBER

6PM

NO 4 MANOR COURT

MANSFIELD RD

BARRY THOMAS MATTHEWS

COMMEMORATIVE EXHIBITION

AT THE FLAT

"THE EARLY WORKS"

15 OCTOBER 1993

GALLERY HOURS:

Mon - Thurs: ~~8:30 - 16:00~~

Friday: ~~8:30 - 12:00~~

ANYTIME

Posters for Barry's exhibition, 1993.

THOMAS BARRY
 Drawing installation
 1993



Reminiscent of Surrealist work, in particular the *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse), the images were created through strange combinations of contradictory elements. Though the result of a single artist's hand and not the multiple efforts of those who produced an *exquisite corpse*, the power of these collage-like images was also in part due to their 'disjointed' effect. The large scale of the drawings provided a vehicle for what appeared to be very spontaneous and direct, notebook-like drawings. Unframed, with the curled edges and the weight of the material evident, this rather casual presentation of these drawings asserted them as 'objects'. Images included an absurd landscape, where monstrous figures cavorted in a scene full of violence and humor. Like shreds of some larger body of work, samples from a visual diary, it was as if the brain had connected directly to the hand to express itself in a language that was obsessive, complex and layered.

Along with the charcoal drawings, were a matchbox collection displayed along the upper skirting-board and a series of playing cards gathered at random from the street. The matchboxes, numbering over 500, were placed end to end to create a frieze around the perimeter of the entire room. Like Duchamp's famous 'ready-mades', the artworks were made by the simple choosing of an ordinary object and the changing of its context. The gesture in making the work began with a gathering and bringing of these items from the world into a gallery space, but their significance was not limited to mere re-contextualization. It was Barry's habit to pick up discarded playing



THOMAS BARRY
Installation with
charcoal on fabric and
found match-boxes.
1993

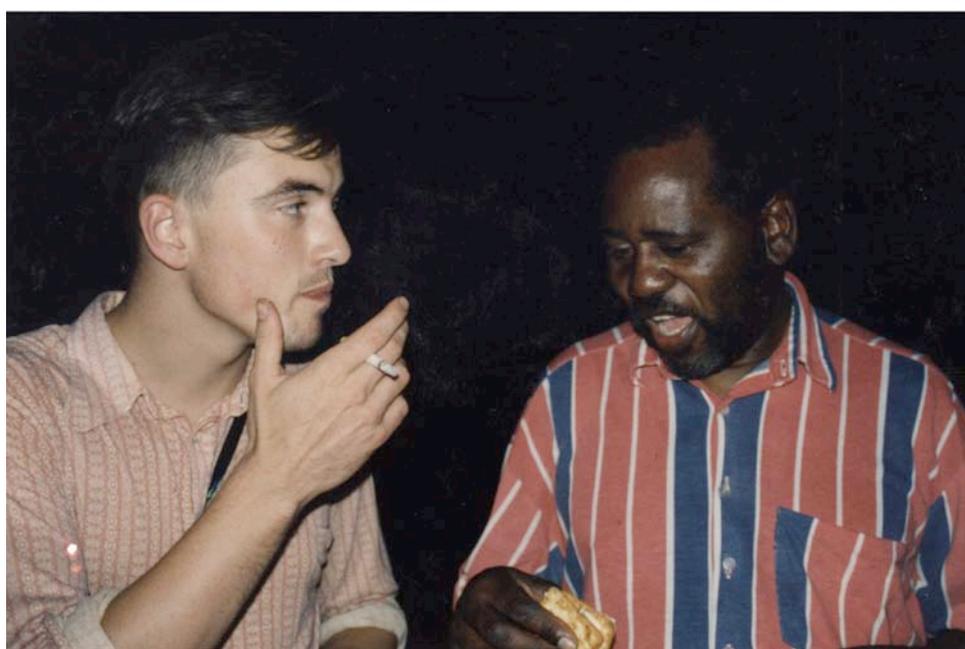
cards and matchboxes, and many in this collection showed evidence of markings and notes from their unknown previous owners. There was indeed an almost ‘performative’ component, where these items on display operated like archival evidence of a ‘throw-away’ history.

Also on exhibit were photographs documenting an installation of a work by Barry with cohorts near the Warwick Avenue Train Station earlier that year. These images emphasized the performative aspect of the project over mere documentation of the piece. Shot by Rensha Bouwer with harsh flash, the photos capture the guerrilla style, ‘hit-and-run’ character of the work. Indeed this clandestine activity was also recorded by a busload of American tourists who happened to be passing at that time. The images show the hanging of a banner over a concrete overpass in front of the railway station, and as with Barry’s found object collections displayed in the gallery, operated through a strategy of shifting context. In other words, the banner was a ‘found’ object, a Technikon Natal sign complete with name and coat of arms. A kind of ‘intervention’ occurred not only through the alteration of the existing text, which was ‘fudged’ to read, “What is Your Response?”¹; but also through the shifting of the defaced banner to another public site. Upon what would be a chance encounter outside any expectation of viewing ‘art’, a viewer might be unsure of

¹ Barry; Interview 10, e-mail, cyberspace, Oct 13, 1998.

the identity or purpose of the displaced banner. The transformation also included a broom attached and a rope ladder hanging down from the bottom.

It is also worth noting that with this first exhibition a precedent began where exhibitors were not required to contribute cash to the general operating costs of the FLAT. This was the sole responsibility of the FLAT occupants. In an effort to offset the expenses, we attempted to sell alcohol at the first opening, but this endeavor proved to be unfruitful. (The 'I-owe-you's' on the list outnumbered the art works!) The rental for the three-room apartment, at this time, was paid for by Moe, Jonker and myself.



Above Left: Moe & Hedwig Barry. Above Right: Barry, Gainer & Ken Godfrey. Bottom: Rhett Martyn & Sam Ntshangase

JOHANNESBURG ART NOW
Slide presentation
October 21, 1993

With a precedent set for various student-initiated off-campus exhibitions and an influx of young artists from all over the country, a broader perspective was sought by the small art community in Durban. Frustration was expressed over the lack of an art press and an interest was affirmed in learning more about contemporary artwork outside of Durban. In response, an informal discussion and slide presentation was organized by the FLAT and presented by Carol Gainer and others, focusing on work exhibited in Johannesburg.

It was significant in that many young artists had seen little of contemporary South African artwork from outside the region exhibited in Durban, and also lacked the means to travel to Johannesburg. For many, unfamiliar with the work of such emerging South African artists as Belinda Blignaut, Marc Edwards, Allan Alborough, etc, it was an important affirmation of a growing interest in exploring new art forms. Recently, I discussed the value of such an event with Durban artist and lecturer, Virginia MacKenny, who was present at the slide show.

Allen: What I think was interesting here was that it was a bunch of Durban people looking at Johannesburg artists' work.

MacKenny: It seemed to be a time when young Durban artists were making connections with Joburg artists. And taking work into their own hands. Previously it had always been lecturers going up, taking slides, coming back and dishing them out. The lecturers do it and the students do nothing.

Allen: There seemed to be a certain amount of apathy amongst students in that.

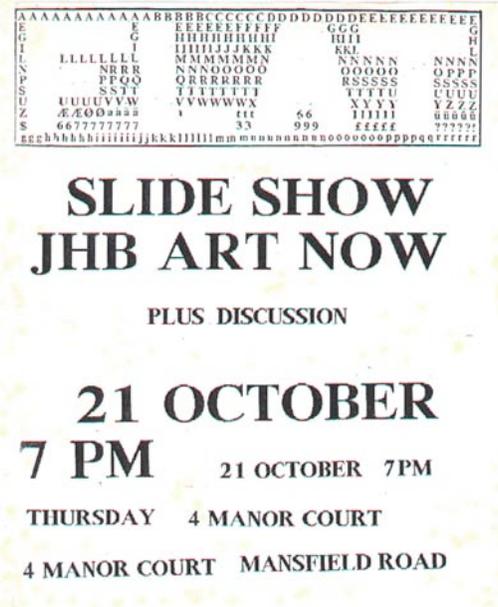
MacKenny: Oh absolutely! And, what was nice about that show was that students had got off their butts and had done exactly that. Another thing is that students were making connections with Joburg artists that I had no access to. So I was getting more information. Instead of being passive and apathetic and letting the lecturers do all the work...there is that strong notion at Tech that the lecturers did all the work and the students tagged on...but no, there were individual endeavors happening...other people going out, making conversations and bringing things back.²

² MacKenny, Moe, Buster, Allen; Interview 9, Washington, Aug 24, 1998.

Additionally, it was a communal effort to address the need to continue one’s art education through self-initiative after university. Though the inclusion of an ‘educational’ component to programming was common to most alternative spaces, which offer ‘walkabouts’ and slide talks, the FLAT slide show was uniquely significant in that it was created spontaneously out of the direct demand of those who participated.

Allen: Would you say that the FLAT, in retrospect, performed a social function [typical of institutions like the NSA] but that was not really made available by institutions like the NSA or the DAG [in terms of content anyway]?

MacKenny: I wouldn’t even say in retrospect, I would say at the time I was very conscious that it was a very necessary thing. And that within that social interaction, very important things would happen. It seemed to me to be the most lively area of debate that was available.³



³ Ibid.



LEDELLE MOE, Untitled
concrete & Steel, 1993
Here Moe took advantage of
the street below the FLAT.

CAROL-ANNE GAINER, LEDELLE MOE, JANINA ERLICH
October 29, 1993

Following the momentum of Barry's opening and the slide presentation, another show was organized within a few days. This was a three-person exhibition of work by Carol Gainer, Ledelle Moe, and Janina Erlich. Most significant, was the manner in which each artist used the exhibition opportunity to take a more experimental approach to her work. Gainer explored mixed-media canvases, in a departure from her paintings that dealt with landscape. Erlich, also a painter, moved into computer generated images. Moe's work in the gallery included a small wall shelf of found objects mixed with modeled wax elements, but it was her concrete animal sculptures and gun on the pavement outside the FLAT, that broke with the limitations of the traditional exhibition space.

Gainer's contribution to the exhibition included an experimental reworking of a painting that she had completed previously, as well as relief constructions built with objects attached to painted panels. This involved the exploration of what was for her both new imagery and new processes. Here surfaces were not only 'painted', but also 'constructed' with a wide range of raw materials that included resin-cast dried roses, photocopied text, and perspex sheets.

In the interview with MacKenny we discussed Gainer's work:

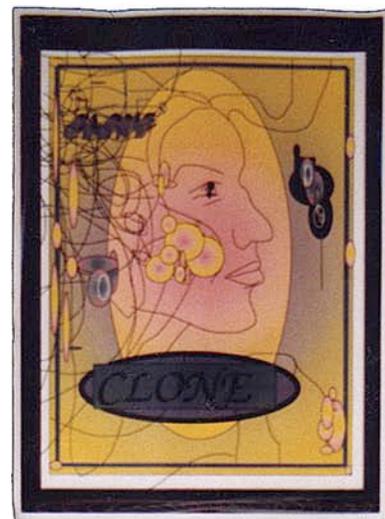
Allen: At the FLAT there was the idea that you had to do something different from your normal work. I remember

c a r o l g a i n e r
 l e d e l l e m o e
 j a n i n a e r l i c h



FLAT
 FRIDAY 29 OCTOBER 6:00 PM

Exhibition poster, 1993



JANINA ERLICH, 'Clone', computer generated image, 1993

that for this exhibition that she had reworked one of her old ‘brown’ landscapes with bright red paint – a very aggressive shift I think.

MacKenny: I didn’t realise that she was using the resin-casts as early as this.

Allen: That was a brand new piece. It was her most recent and it moved directly away from her landscape work.

MacKenny: And in retrospect, not so directly though. Despite these early landscape works, the insertion of the Madonna here is the direction in which she then followed. Because from there on, with these roses embodied and so on, the things that she made, and that were attached to the canvas became more personalized. The landscape was out there...but the metaphor for the body was coming through. I remember wondering why she was applying these objects, but now it seems quite logical in terms of the direction that her work since then has taken. The body and the painting being a space in which you could imbed things. She undertook this lengthy process and it was also followed through in her first NSA show. Now I look at the last show she did where the body is absolutely primary, it is not covertly presented but rather overtly presented to the point where she displays herself naked. If you look at these sources I can see connections, though I did not realise that she was doing this so early. I think again for me, looking back at all these people, it is interesting to see that it was not just spurious work.⁴

Moe’s sculptures, removed from the gallery, became activated by being ‘on the street’ and constituted an action that was at that time illegal. Addressing the public in a very direct manner, Moe placed these ‘collapsed carcasses’ on the sidewalk in such a way that a passerby could not help but be confronted. In an interview with Moe she says:

Moe: I think we had the luxury of time then, though. I remember sitting on the balcony (for a number of days) and watching people passing by the sculptures on the pavement. And someone at 4am in the morning would trip over the leg and then curse and kick it. The public interaction with those pieces was very interesting.

Allen: With the shift in government, the fact that you could just do that - leave the artwork on the pavement - we felt that there was a sense of lawlessness in the country. The police would not come and say: “What the hell is this in the street? Take it away!” There was that sense of freedom, that one could just do anything. If you wanted to exhibit in the street, then you just did it.⁵

Moe later recalled a comment by Art History lecturer Lola Frost, which seemed particularly significant to her own understanding of her use of the vulnerable creatures. Frost had commented that Moe’s previous work had dealt with confrontational images of aggressive

⁴ Ibid.



Above: CAROL GAINER
mixed-media, 1993
Below left: CAROL GAINER
mixed-media, 1993
Below right: CAROL GAINER
mixed-media, 1993
This detail shows the resin cast
roses and perspex 'windows'.





LEDELLE MOE, 'Untitled', concrete & steel, 1993.

animals, while this piece represented the victimized and defeated. Indeed one had the sense that these animals had been carelessly ‘discarded’. Opposite the prone animal figures across Mansfield Road, Moe situated another sculptural element that also spoke to issues of violence and injury. There she placed an enormous gun constructed from a street lamp pole. MacKenny and Moe discussed the sculpture and the importance of ‘extending’ the work into the street:

MacKenny: I like that the outside of the FLAT also became part of its territory. And I think what is interesting is that it made the passer-by aware of something...it was like an intervention.

Moe: The weird thing about making things in South Africa at that time, was (for example with the “dead animals”) that rural people that saw it would say: “Oh, what is it? What kind of animal is it? It looks like a bloated sheep, but not really.” And they would automatically go into a very pragmatic, farm kind of analysis... “It looks like it swelled up and died, but how did it die?” They would get into the story of it and believe it. Across the road, on the opposite pavement, was the big gun...

MacKenny: Wasn’t that a telephone pole?

Moe: Yes, the one night, I was driving around and I came across the fallen over telephone pole. Somehow or other, I managed to get it into the yellow panel van and drove it down to the sculpture department. I welded the gun butt onto it etc. And then Adrian and I took it up to the FLAT on a number of trolleys dragged behind the car. There is such a difference between the freedom we had on that strip – Mansfield Road – and any other road in Durban.

MacKenny: As I said, what I find interesting is that the FLAT actually extended its exhibiting space outside of the cube. And in terms of the dead animals, I find them interesting, because you cannot (as the rural people were saying) identify what kind of animal they were. So you begin to have this amorphous identity, which allows for the metaphoric content to get broader. For me the power of these ‘beasts’ is that their sense of abandonment becomes more powerful when they are left on the streets.

Moe: I remember writing essays for Lola, about the victim and victor. And that was the first piece that was just complete defeat. It was a collapse.

MacKenny: It is like road-kill.

Moe: They had died. They were gone.

MacKenny: Except it leaves a feeling of before. It always has a before and an after. “Precisely what happened? How did they die”, you know. And because it was in a public site, I mean those photographs are great, precisely because people gather around. This is your gallery audience - anybody! Anybody, who walks the street. No body is going to walk past those things and a) miss them, or b) not pause to think, “What the fuck are these things doing here?”⁵

⁵ Ibid.

A MINOR RETROSPECTIVE ***November 2, 1993***

Organized by the members of the FLAT, this exhibition was designed to coincide with Kendall Geers' first exhibition in Durban. Geers, then a young artist from Johannesburg, was exhibiting an installation of suspended bricks at the Technikon Art Gallery. Indeed this installation referenced an earlier work in which he attached a newspaper clipping that described incidents of violence in South Africa to an ordinary brick.

In a subversive strategy orchestrated by Gainer, Moe, Barry, and myself, works by Geers were photocopied from various catalogues, mounted on masonite squares and presented minimally on the walls of the FLAT. In this way, we set out to orchestrate a *faux* retrospective of Geers' work.

We printed invitations and put up posters across Durban. When the posters and advertising went out, Geers thought initially that these had originated from the institution that was sponsoring the legitimate exhibition, the Technikon Gallery. He remarked on their quality, thinking that they had been made by Frances van Melsen, the gallery's curator. The situation grew more complex and hilarious when Van Melsen, was told of the dual exhibition at the FLAT. She mistakenly thought that it was Geers who had prepared the other exhibition, and so announced at his opening, that there was more of his work just across the road at the FLAT. Confusion continued over the authenticity of the FLAT exhibition, with some viewers expressing their preference for the Geers exhibition at the FLAT over the one at the Technikon Gallery.

Also, an unintentional, but strangely appropriate occurrence contributed to the absurdity. In an attempt to remedy our dirty floor at the FLAT, we painted it less than three hours before the opening with fresh, black, enamel floor paint. It did not dry for the opening. The crowds came and stuck to the wet painted floor, while viewing work that no one except the FLAT co-conspirators suspected was not Geers' work. Upon visiting the exhibition at the FLAT, interestingly, Geers never denied that the FLAT exhibition was a *faux* exhibition of his work, leaving many viewers with the impression that he had indeed mounted two shows in Durban.



'A Minor Retrospective', photostated images, masonite, black enamel paint, 1993. Melissa Marrins at the 'Geers' installation.



'A Minor Retrospective', 1993. Traces of gallery visitors' footprints on the wet, sticky floor.

Earlier this year, I interviewed Lola Frost, a lecturer in Art History and Theory at the Technikon. She had been to both exhibitions and unknowingly played a key role in expanding this absurdity.

Allen: Apparently, you had said to Geers that you thought his installation at the FLAT was much better than the one at the Technikon Gallery?

Frost: Yes.

Allen: Did you realise that it wasn't his work?

Frost: No.

Allen: Why did you think the FLAT work was better?

Frost: I suppose it was much more poetic. Besides the scale of the images and the transgressive act of walking on the wet floor - it seemed to me, in terms of the criteria I was using then, that it was metaphorically loaded. As we know, Kendell's whole business is to trash that. It is interesting that you, as Durban artists, would have spoken within that poetic frame-work. And of course we have often spoken about that divide between Johannesburg and Durban - the romantic versus the post-modern... if you want to call it that. Which I think that little maneuver was really about.

Allen: Another thing that I think is quite significant is that when you told him that the FLAT show was better than the Technikon show, he never denied it. He never said it is not my work. He actually thanked you.

Frost: No, he didn't deny it.

Allen: Which I think is an interesting shift as well. He accepted the FLAT exhibition and therefor became part of it. In other words he appropriated it.

Frost: Which is all part of his cynical agenda.⁷

I also discussed this exhibition with co-conspirator, Carol Gainer, in an e-mail interview. We talked about the importance of the collaborative nature of this project and our move away from 'art on display' to a more 'event' orientated exhibition.

Allen: How did this *'faux'* exhibition' come about?

Gainer: It was an idea of yours to stage a show at the same time as Kendell's show at the Technikon Gallery (hanging bricks)?

Allen: Would you say that this was a collaborative event? If so, would you say that it was the first collaboration at the FLAT? Do you think that these 'subversive' collaborative efforts at the FLAT were intrinsic in forming its identity as an experimental space?

⁷ Frost, Allen; Interview 12, Richmond, Feb 18, 1999.

Gainer: I do think that this was probably the first “collaboration” we as the FLAT did and this did seem to feed the notion of the FLAT being an experimental space.

Allen: Can you describe your role in the event?

Gainer: My role was, at the time, a “bridging”, since I had by then formed a friendship with Kendell and had helped him hang his show at Tech and since he was staying with me he was very aware of “his other show”.

Allen: To what extent did the chance action of repainting the floor influence the ‘subversive’ meaning of the installation?

Gainer: The chance act of painting the floor was very important to the reading of the exhibit. In fact I think that the stickiness of the wet paint and the feeling of it under one’s feet and the sound of it was what actually made the exhibit so strong at the time. It certainly shifted the reading of the exhibit.

Allen: Some viewers like Lola Frost commented that they thought Geers’ “FLAT Installation” was more interesting than his “Tech. installation”. Geers the true situationist that he is never denied this fact, and too remarked that he thought that his FLAT work was better than his other piece. Leaving many viewers with the impression that he had indeed mounted two shows in Durban.

Gainer: The fact that Lola made the mistake and Kendell said nothing was also extremely important. Kendell was very aware of being a co-conspirator and that was also what gave the whole event a collaborative feel.⁸

In the discussion between Moe, MacKenny; American artist, Kendall Buster and myself, MacKenny had these comments:

MacKenny: I remember that show, you had a whole lot of tiny images of his work...

Allen: And we had just painted the floor and thus it was very sticky.

MacKenny: Yes, so you were kind of stuck to the floor and it made those sucking noises as you moved around the exhibition. I think it was actually a brilliant idea. [Laughter] Kendell’s exhibition at the NSA was a series of hanging bricks, and I think he was using that chevron tape around the pillars. And there were long discussions with Kendell about whether this was art or not. Some people tried to find metaphors in it and Kendell would say: “No, the enemy of the artist is symbol, metaphor, mood, evocation”... and he literally threw any vocabulary that any artist had used out the window.

Buster: Funny, I never thought of him as a post-minimalist, truth to materials, kind of guy. Was that a phase he was in?

⁸ Gainer, Allen; Interview 11, e-mail, cyberspace, Nov 15, 1998.



'A Minor Retrospective', photostated images & masonite, 1993.
The seven images that were on exhibition at the FLAT with a coin for scale.

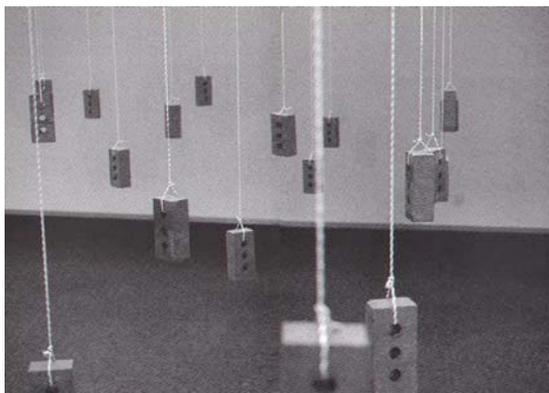
MacKenny: No, he even denied that. [Laughter] People were saying, “What about Carl Andre’s bricks?” And he even denied any connection to that.

Allen: While he was hanging that show, I remember speaking to him and he said one of his sources for the piece was Ad Reinhardt. Which was kind of strange, but which I thought was quite interesting nonetheless.

MacKenny: I never know whether to believe Kendell when he says those kind of things. I think he could be fucking around. When anyone brought up a connection for example when the work was critiqued in a negative way...some people said this thing only works because it is in South Africa, and Carl Andre did this kind of thing in the 60s and so on. I think he acknowledged it as some sort of reference to the brick in South Africa, that it is both a weapon and a building block. I think he acknowledged that as part of the impetus.

Allen: He also referenced the idea of hanging bricks from bridge over roadways as a form of terrorism.

MacKenny: I think he was placing it within a South African context. But when anyone tried to get on any other level, he just pulled away. What it did was create more discussion about what art was, what you believed in, what you had faith in, than any other art exhibition that had happened at the Technikon. Whether you hated it or loved it, what it really generated was intense discussion and that is what was so important. What I liked about the FLAT show, was precisely that, it threw into relief, exactly the same issues. It is interesting...he is a man who thinks on his feet so in that way he did not deny that the false exhibition was his work. He actually let it play out. But the fact that you had initiated it without asking permission. You had in turn appropriated his images. There was a collaborative anonymity in that no single individual took responsibility. That was very much part of the discussion of the FLAT Gallery as well. You were playing games and in a funny kind of way you almost out-Kendelled Kendell. [Laughter]⁹



KENDALL GEERS
Hanging Piece
Bricks suspended on nylon rope
1993
Installed at the Technikon Natal Art Gallery,
this was Geers’ exhibition that ran
concurrent with *A Minor Retrospective*
at the FLAT.
(This image is taken from the book by
Kendell Geers; *Argot*, Johannesburg,
Chalkham Hill Press, 1995, p. 14 – 15)

⁹ MacKenny, Moe, Buster, Allen; Interview 9, Washington, Aug 24, 1998.

The performative aspect of this *faux* exhibition (and the small ‘dramas’ that spun out from it) functioned through a collaborative action. However, perhaps more important was the fact that this action was somewhat conspiratorial and challenged the notions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘reality’. The art on the walls was not ‘real’, and the ‘exhibition’ extended beyond the gallery into the world through an intervention that was subtle and subversive. In a sense, our exhibition ‘conversed’ with Geers’ work not only through the obvious ‘plagiarizing’ of his images, but more importantly through the very tactics that we employed. This seemed resonant with Geers’ own efforts to explore not only form and image, but also **context**. The radical nature of his work, in other words, functioned not only through the language **within** the work but also through its ‘behavior’ in the world.

We later came to regard this as the first ‘situationist’ event at the FLAT, and to develop an interest in many of the strategies and concerns articulated by the Situationist movement.¹⁰ Ken Knabb describes in his Situationist anthology the historical details of the movement:

In 1957, a few European avant-garde groups came together to form the Situationist International. Over the next decade the SI developed an increasingly incisive and coherent critique of modern society and of its bureaucratic pseudo-opposition, and its new methods of agitation were influential in leading up to the May 1968 revolt in France. Since then - although the SI itself was dissolved in 1972 - situationist theses and tactics have been taken up by radical currents in dozens of countries all over the world.¹¹

In a document for the *Situationist International* #9 (August 1964), the term is defined:

[Situationist] denotes an activity that aims at **making** situations as opposed to passively recognizing them in academic or other separate terms... We replace existential passivity with... **playful affirmation**... Our theories are nothing other than the theory of our real life, of the possibilities experienced or perceived in it.¹²

“Playful affirmation” is a term that perhaps best describes spirit of the FLAT’s *faux* exhibition and the ‘trickster’ tactics. Often employed to bring one’s creative practice into the

¹⁰ Though, at that time, we were only vaguely aware of the Situationist movement and the term, “situationist”; a more conscious influence was articulated later with the involvement of FLAT participant, Jay Horsburgh. Horsburgh, who would bring to the debate material from a number of important texts, was reading Sadie Plant’s book on the Situationist movement: *The Most Radical Gesture*.

¹¹ Ken Knabb; *Situationist International – Anthology*, Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981, p. ix.

¹² ‘Now, the S.I.’, Ken Knabb (ed); *Situationist International – Anthology*, p. 138.

world and to provoke the public through methods, these are approaches that seek to ‘infiltrate’ or act directly on the **institution**.

In his biography of Situationist Guy Debord, Len Bracken describes a ‘provocation’ by one of the Lettrists.¹³ “On an Easter Sunday in 1950, Michel Mourre slipped onto the altar of Notre Dame Cathedral, dressed as a Dominican monk and delivered this sermon written by the Lettrist poet, Serge Berna, to the thousands of people attending the service:

*Today Easter of the Holy Year here under the insignia of the Basilica of Notre
Dame de Paris
I accuse
the Universal Catholic Church of the deadly diversion of the force of life in
favor of an empty heaven
I accuse
the Catholic Church of a con job
I accuse
the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its mortuary morality of
being the chancre sore of the decaying Western World
I tell you the truth: God is dead
We vomit the agonizing tastelessness of your prayers because your prayers are
the greasy smoke of the Battlefields of our Europe
Go forth into the tragic and exalted desert of a world where God is dead and
once again till this earth with your bare hands with your PROUD hands
with your unpraying hands*

*Today Easter of the Holy Year
Here in the Basilica of Notre-Dame de France, we proclaim the death of Jesus
Christ so that at last Man lives.”¹⁴*

Though the intention was to create a provocation and a ‘scandal’, one can only wonder how effective such a strategy might had been had he been mistaken for a legitimate monk for the duration of his speech. A performance (or intervention) that does not immediately reveal itself as ‘performance’ offers an opportunity for not only scandal, but also subversion. This was explored through a number of works in *Crapshoot*; launched in 1996 as part of the curatorial training programme at De Appel in Amsterdam. Geers, an artist participant and fellow South African Clive

¹³ The Letterist International, an ‘avant-garde’ movement seen as a precursor to the Situationist International.

¹⁴ Len Bracken; *Guy Debord – Revolutionary*, Venice, Feral House, 1997, p. 10-11.

Kellner, a training curator, were both involved in the project. Indeed, the position of these artists *vis a vis* situationism is consciously acknowledged by Kellner in the *Crapshoot* catalogue essay. He speaks here of Geers:

He was born in May 1968 at the time of the Paris student riots, as if this is not enough, he proclaims a line to the Situationist International... Kendall Geers changed his birth date as an artwork, an act of appropriation involving one of the epochs in recent European history, Guy Debord, the critical avant-garde...so the myth making goes on, a compilation of lies, hearsay, and mis-informed journalism. Partly contrived, but mostly true.¹⁵

Geers, with a number of artists such as Italian, Maurizio Cattelan, participated in an exhibition that was built around a number of ‘off site’ artist interventions. One such project instigated by Cattelan, but involving most of the participates, included the illegal activity of breaking into the Bloom Gallery. In the ‘performance’, they first stole the entire contents of the gallery (including the art and the office equipment) in an action titled: *Operation Giant Blossum* in April 1996, packed it and then redisplayed it in the De Appel exhibition space. The title card read:

Maurizio Cattelan, “**Another Fucking Readymade**”, April 11 (10:30 a.m.), 1996.
 Courtesy Bloom Gallery.
 Contents of Bloom Gallery including Paul de Reus exhibition and office equipment.
 Situated on second floor of De Appel, following the action “**Operation Giant Blossom**”,
 April 11 (7:00 - 7:40 a.m.), 1996.¹⁶

According to Saskia Bos, the head curator at De Appel, the curatorial staff at De Appel was not aware of the project. She spoke in conversation with Otto Berchem about the complexity of the experience and begins by telling about the initial call from her assistant:

She said, “I have to tell your something. They’ve broken into the Bloom Gallery... this is impossible. The police are involved” etc. I had this meeting and I knew I couldn’t do anything, then I went to De Appel and we discussed the whole thing with Cattelan. What I wanted to hear were the content arguments, the real artistic reasons why he did it. He spoke about what I would say was appropriation and the need to make that appropriation in reality, and the need to bring something into another space, from one space to another. I remember asking myself, over and over, why he had not written a letter to ask if he could bring the show from one place to another, why didn’t he involve them consciously, willingly, knowingly. He said, “No, because I had to transgress this line.

¹⁵ Clive Kellner; ‘Armchair Anarchy’, *The Crap Shooter*, 1st Edition, Amsterdam, De Appel, April 1996, p.15.

I have to do something without their consent.” It was the surprise that he was interested in. It was a pretty calm meeting because I wanted it to be calm. The excitement of it was already big enough with the others. So we really discussed, for hours, about “why did you leave the note. ‘Don’t worry. Everything is OK. You will see everything again soon.’ Why didn’t you leave another kind of note?”¹⁷

Indeed, the importance of an action done without ‘permission’ is articulated here. Kellner, in discussing Geers speaks to this:

The institution provides the frame or context for these gestures, as radical as they may be. It is the institution which appears to grant permission to the gesture. Partly this is hugely problematic, as there is nothing worse than being given ‘permission’ to break or destroy some fascinating object.¹⁸

Also, for *Crapshoot*, Geers ‘constructed’ an installation that marked a return to the use of the brick. The ‘sculpture’, an empty gallery room with a broken window and a brick on the floor was ‘constructed’ by the artist throwing a brick through the De Appel gallery window. Saskia Bos on Geers’ *Title Withheld (Brick)* 1996 at De Appel says:

I think Kendell Geers’ brick through the window is the strongest of the ‘broken works’. It relates to the street, it’s a clear message, in one room, it’s absolutely an icon for hate, or aggression towards an institution.¹⁹

This work is in fact a remake of an earlier work, *Title Withheld (Brick)* 1994, at the Market Gallery in Johannesburg and is also mentioned by Hazel Friedman in her critique of the show in the *STAR Tonight*.

Geers obsesses about South Africa’s pathology of violence, demonstrated by throwing a brick through the window of the Market Gallery – a throwback to a previous work bought by the Johannesburg Art Gallery – and incorporating the brick, the gaping hole and shards of glass into the artwork.²⁰

Both the Market and the De Appel works, are examples of ‘simulated violence’. And indeed the ‘simulated experience’ is an effective strategy employed to question both the viewer’s

¹⁶ *The Crap Shooter*, 2nd Edition, Amsterdam, De Appel, May 1996, p. 15.

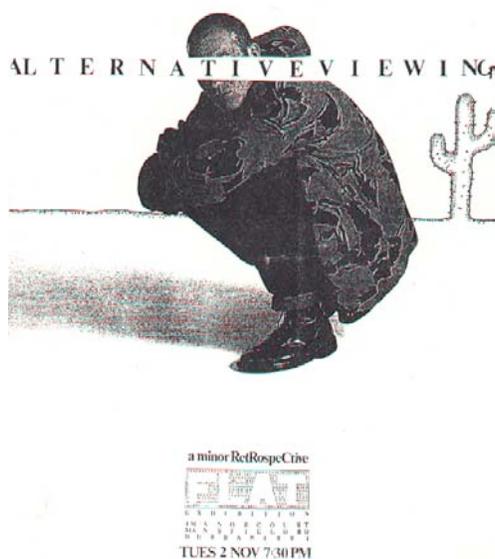
¹⁷ Otto Berchem; ‘Saskia Bos – a chit chat with O.B.’, *The Crap Shooter*, 2nd Edition, p. 16.

¹⁸ Clive Kellner; ‘Archchair Anarchy’, *The Crap Shooter*, 1st Edition, p. 15.

¹⁹ Otto Berchem; ‘Saskia Bos – a chit chat with O.B.’, *The Crap Shooter*, 2nd Edition, p. 16.

²⁰ Hazel Friedman; ‘Legends In Their Own Minds’, *The Star Tonight*, Johannesburg, August 22, 1994.

notion of 'reality' and the institution's role as a neutral 'white cube'. The viewer enters the exhibition and encounters a situation that is not as it appears. Whether that encounter is with what first seems to be an act of vandalism against that institution, as at De Appel, or an exhibition that creates confusion over authorship, as in the FLAT, the question is still asked, "Is this a reality or a simulation?"



A variation on the exhibition poster, 1993



Top Left: NIEL JONKER, the carpet heart, 1993. Top Right: NIEL JONKER, the tar flag, 1993.
Bottom Left: NIEL JONKER, the plaster kidney, 1993. Bottom Right: NIEL JONKER, the rubber wig, 1993.

NIËL JONKER
November 23, 1993

Niël Jonker, one of the founding members of the FLAT, mounted an exhibition of mixed media sculpture which included an impressive number of individual objects crafted with a variety of techniques. Using materials that ranged from cast road tar to kitsch carpeting, Jonker created a rich personal vocabulary of enigmatic three-dimensional visual symbols. Shirts cast in sand inside a lead covered suitcase, a rubber wig, a wax eye with images imprinted and a tar flag were but a few of the free standing and relief works that made up the exhibition.

Casting was an important process in Jonker's work, and for these he used industrial materials to transform and re-present both hand modeled and found objects. The original reference remained recognizable and so was strongly linked to the source. The viewer could immediately recognize the loaded images - heart, eye, flag, suitcase, shirt etc... However, in choosing such evocative sensual materials to 'render' these familiar objects, Jonker opened up the possibilities of how material can also operate as poetic metaphor.

Notable in this presentation of works, also, was one that demonstrated a slight departure from the crafted sculptures that seemed to reference his more personal symbols and pointed to a self-conscious reference to kitsch 'art objects' of the region. Here he transformed a found copper-clad curio mounting plate by fabricating a wax 'horn' that transformed into a tongue and rudely penetrated the viewer's space. Usually adorned with an animal's horn such as a rhino, these 'African curios' are familiar items in gift shops in South Africa and speak more to what is colonial than what is 'African'. With this 'copper-based curio horn', Jonker commented on how socio-political content is inscribed in even seemingly 'innocent' South African popular culture; how gift shop souvenirs reflect the lingering colonial past. There is something distinctly ironic about the inauthenticity of a stuffed animal trophy that has been 'bought'. Through its displacement into a Fine Art context, its obvious reference is shifted and its covert meaning exposed.

Later that year, Jonker extended his explorations of transformation through casting, in an event that proved to be even more politically charged and potentially controversial. One evening, with Adrian Hermanides, Jonker set out to take a plaster cast from the boot of the memorial statue of Louis Botha in the local park. When police come to question why such activity would be taking place in the middle of the night, the artists told the officers that they were from the parks

department and were fixing the bronze statue in their overtime. The police believed the tale and as the story goes even offered to assist with bringing water. Jonker then made a wax boot cast from the mold made that evening. In a continued 'dialogue' with this same monument, Piers Mansfield returned to the statue some months later and painted that same boot pink.

The making of the 'curio' and the 'interaction' with the Botha statue were significant in that they operated through a change in context and spoke to images that were strongly associated with the colonial past. In a sense, Jonker's curio and the interaction with the Botha statue were examples of ways in which we sought to offer a critical voice by using (and subverting) the very language of the thing being critiqued - in this case the collectable commodity and the heroic statuary. But were these just pranks? Were these acts readable enough to be communicative and therefore politically meaningful? These same questions would be asked; these same strategies revisited by many of us at the FLAT in the years to come.



Left: NIEL JONKER, the wax eye, 1993. Right: NIEL JONKER, the horn/tounge curio, 1993.

CLINTON DE MENEZES
November 26, 1993

A recent graduate from the Natal Technikon, De Menezes exhibited collage works. These included both a series of eight identically sized panels presented on the walls, a relief construction and a bench-like structure. On the bench, images were layered onto the top surface and a book created from bound drawings lay in shallow trays attached to its sides.

Using a very iconographic presentation of these images, his vocabulary included, landscape, spirals, circles, fire, and the human hand. 'Mandala-like', these referenced spirituality, the earth and self-transformation. A recurrent and significant image was that of the 'heroic' horse and rider with a broken sword.

Of interest was the fact that the sources for many of these collage images were taken from popular culture - advertisements to be then transformed into meaningful icons. The horse and rider image, here representing the hero with the broken sword, was originally a label from an alcohol bottle or cigarette packet. One work, addressing the notion of 'communication', was a collaged panel construction with a small shelf holding a working telephone. Circular symbols taken from the emergency page of the South African telephone book were features on the panel. Here an interesting linkage was created between those symbols associated with spirituality and contemplation and those with crisis.

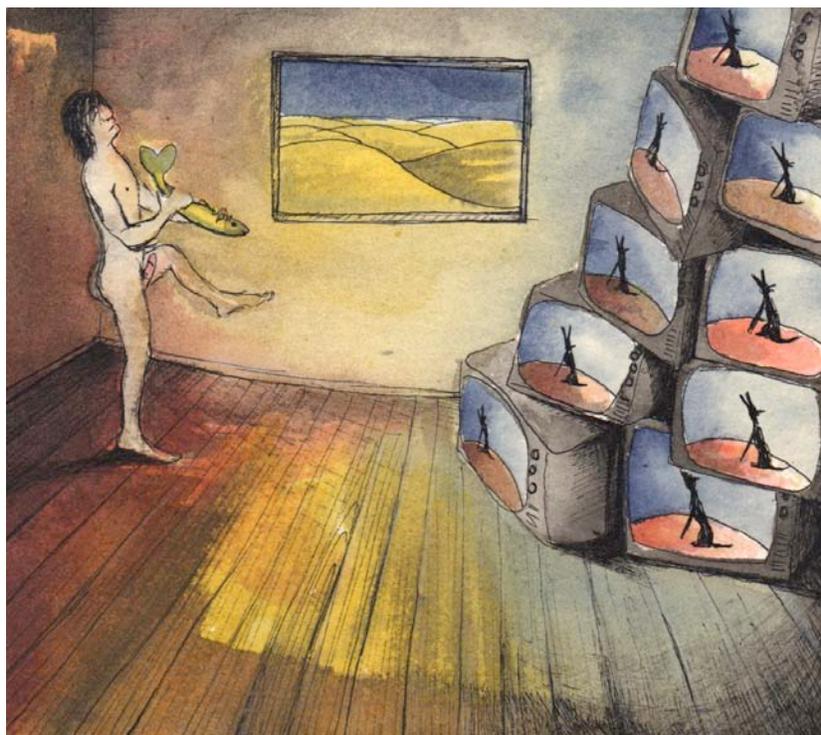


CLINTON DE
MENEZES
1993

ANDREW STRODE
Cars, Flowers and Cities - A Collection of Short Stories
December 2, 1993

In this exhibition, a student for the Natal Technikon presented a large collection of miniature watercolors. The show was titled *Cars, Flowers and Cities - A Collection of Short Stories* and they were indeed detailed narratives that dealt with these and other themes. Private satires of the oppressiveness of the 'big city', the pervasiveness of the media, and the loneliness of a masturbatory life style, the drawings were at once both theatrical and internally psychological. Like scenes from dreams, each operated like a window into a single moment of a complex tale. In one, a small naked figure, his erect penis echoed by the curved fish he holds, stands poised in front of a stack of televisions.

Also on exhibition was an abstract experimental video, where the artist shot a film through the lens of a glass bottle. The footage showed a distorted image of a casual walk around the environs of Durban.



ANDREW STRODE
Pen & ink, watercolours on paper.
1993