

**MELISSA MARRINS, TARYN FOX**  
**December 5, 1993**

This show along with the Strode exhibition marked a rise in the FLAT Gallery's popularity amongst younger students. Motivated by an interest to present portfolios for Technikon critiques, these two artists both addressed the subject of the female figure, but with approaches that were vastly different one from the other.

Fox's presentation was a straightforward exhibition of paintings strongly grounded in the academic figure tradition taught at the Technikon. Marrins, on the other hand, had started to break away from painting to also explore assemblage. She showed both paintings and an installation that used the figure to satirically address issues of Catholicism and 'beauty'.

These iconoclastic works, paintings framed to reference shrines, included images of Mary with the words "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary" and collaged images of Jesus and Mary where Jesus asks Mary: "Your place or mine?" One included a self-portrait of Marrins where she inserted herself alongside Mary and Venus, referencing familiar Italian Renaissance images by way of an almost 'pop art' language. Though controversial in their conflation of 'sacred' themes with sexuality, Marrins claimed that she was not out to deliberately shock the viewer. Indeed her stated intention was more one of healing through the provocation of some 'recognition' in the viewer. In a 1995 interview for the *FLAT* newsletter Marrins and I spoke about the 'controversial' nature of her work:

**Allen:** Some people find your work shocking, do you think it is? If so, do you think that the shock element provides a 'tool' for people to question their own taste?

**Marrins:** This is an issue that I cannot understand. I do not find my work 'shocking', nor do I deliberately attempt to shock people. If I need to convey a particular feeling (and yes I deal with 'uncomfortable' feelings) then I will choose an image that for me adequately conveys that emotional state. Perhaps the 'shock' element lies in my juxtaposition of elements - a rotten penis with syphilis next to a portrait of Jesus for example. I can only surmise that the 'shock' people feel comes out of an uncomfortable realization that they can relate on some level to my imagery. This is obvious. If they did not recognize some kind of understanding or manifestation of the image within

themselves then they would not be shocked. I am not here to make things easy for the viewer. I would like them to re-assess their realities through questioning mine.<sup>21</sup>

The use of the ‘grotesque’ and the act of ‘transgressing a taboo’, such as combining the sacred and the profane, were indeed strategies that Marrins employed both in this early exhibition and in projects that were to follow.<sup>22</sup> Russian Linguist Mikhail Bakhtin wrote extensively about the phenomenon of the ‘carnival’ and the use of the profane for serious intent. “Colloquial oaths and profanities”, for example, were for Bakhtin “a codified form of verbal protest, a repudiation of officialdom.” Interestingly, the nature of these ‘profanities’ often involved the use of religious imagery. In his seminal book on the work of Bakhtin, Michael Gardiner speaks to this notion:

In thematic terms, these oaths often involved the symbolic rending of the body, particularly the Lord’s body, and references to the bodily relics of saints and holy persons, and to diseases (especially venereal afflictions) and organs of the lower material stratum were commonplace.<sup>23</sup>

Bakhtin’s definitions of the ‘grotesque’ and ‘profane’ are relevant to Marrins’ work, not only in terms of the use of religious imagery, but in terms of her stated purpose. Certainly, such references could be employed in the spirit of cheap irony or ‘shock-effect’. For Marrins, there was an emphatic assertion that some ‘greater meaning’ might be uncovered. Gardiner goes on to say:

The term ‘grotesque’ itself usually conjures up notions of distortion or deformity, usually for the purposes of caricature or irony. For Bakhtin, however, the tendency towards extreme exaggeration in the grotesque is not simply a satirical device, which would fail to explain the ambivalence and unexpected richness and complexity of such images and their connection to seemingly disparate events and phenomena. When infused with grotesque imagery, objects transcend their own ‘natural’ boundaries and become fused or linked with other things. From this is derived their pregnant and two-sided nature, the quality of ‘unfinished becoming’ which is anathema to officialdom. Not surprisingly, Bakhtin asserts that this hyperbole and anamorphosis is positive and affirmative.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the central work in the exhibition was an installation constructed with sheet rubber suspended from the ceiling and supported by hand-made coils that seemed to reference

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<sup>21</sup> Marrins, Allen; Interview 3, *FLAT Newsletter*, Issue 3, Durban, FLAT, July 1995.

<sup>22</sup> See *FLAT Newsletter 3* where Marrins discusses her 1995 installations at Mount Edgecombe, p. 299. Also see *Sub/Merge:SoNic CaLcuLAS(so)O*, her performance at the FLAT with Jay Horsburgh, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Gardiner; *The Dialogics of Critique – M.M. Bakhtin & The Theory of Ideology*, London, Routledge, 1992, p.50.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.



MELISSA MARRINS, "Your Place or Mine?", mixed-media, 1993



MELISSA MARRINS, 'Mary, Mary Quite Contrary', mixed-media, 1993

feces. On its crumpled surface was a portrait of Mary and on the floor below, making a shrine-like circle were crumpled up bits of paper. In that same FLAT interview, she articulated what became her growing interest in installation:

On a personal level I find that I am fired by the challenge to transform and give new meaning to a space... in other words, the space is my canvas.<sup>25</sup>

Recently, the exhibition was discussed with Moe, MacKenny and Buster. A conversation ensued that addressed the 'dialogue' (perhaps unintentionally) that was created between Marrins and Fox's work:

**Buster:** But what an interesting context, putting her work with Melissa's. All of a sudden, what is academic neutral painting is not neutral anymore. The fact that the female nude was considered for how long as a neutral... "its just about colour and form..." It seems very loaded to put a female nude, academic study next to Melissa's work. Wow has the context shifted! The male nude, the same thing...

**MacKenny:** Yes, but I don't think that they were really conscious of that. I think the observation is a valid one and if it had been explored more then it probably would have had more... And these certainly came across as academic studies, except for the fragmented one. Actually if you look at Melissa's suitcase... maybe they were more conscious of it than one realizes. I don't know.

**Moe:** Maybe if they were here now they would see the connections that were maybe not apparent before.

**MacKenny:** That is very often the case. You only make the connections much later.<sup>26</sup>

We also talked about the significance of the exhibition in terms of Marrins later work:

**MacKenny:** She was quite, to put it mildly, irreverent... "Mary, Mary quite contrary". I mean that could have been the title of the show.

**Buster:** Virginia, do you think that in her content, there are things that are consistent, even though she changed her format?

**MacKenny:** Yes, I think that the whole show from Melissa's point of view was highly 'Catholic'. You have the icon and then you ridicule it. But at the same time, the skin is a flagellation...of St. Bartholomew...the flayed thing...

**Buster:** That's the first thing I thought...

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<sup>25</sup> Marrins, Allen; Interview 3, *FLAT* Newsletter, Issue 3, Durban, FLAT, July 1995.

<sup>26</sup> MacKenny, Moe, Buster, Allen; Interview 9, Washington, August 1998.

**MacKenny:** Whether it was conscious or not, I think Melissa was pretty sussed at what she was doing. And I think she would make those connections. She made a suit later out of rubber latex with hair on it and she called it “Hersuit”. It was a wonderful pun between her suit, hairy, flagellation and hair-shirt. All of those things.

**Buster:** And identity is such a consistent theme in her work. Is this her painting with her in the middle between ‘Mary’ and Botticelli’s ‘Venus’? I find that interesting that she is the same woman that took on the role of the “Hippie Chick” at the NSA. That she took those personas on for a while, that she would ‘paint’ herself thus... That she would explore where she would fit into these different images of woman. ‘Madonna’ or the ‘whore’, Venus or both?

**Moe:** I think it is a good example of how different her format was. If Melissa had to describe in that painting, the same thing about five times... Struggling with trying to make the format illusionistic, and the damn paint won’t mix to make the flesh colour... to a very time orientated performance thing where you stick something on you. The content is the same in both.

**MacKenny:** This ‘hanging’ notion is quite interesting, because it comes up in her other work. I know that she always battled with painting. She always found difficulty in expressing the things she wanted to say with paint, and so I think at one point she just threw her hand up in the air and found another way of doing it. I don’t think that painting was the way she wanted to work.<sup>27</sup>



MELISSA  
MARRINS  
Installation with  
rubber-latex, paper,  
resin, steel chain  
1993

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## ***ARTWORKS IN PAPER/PAPERWORKS IN ART December 8, 1993***

A large group exhibition of paper sculpture from “the newly introduced papermaking programme at Technikon Natal”, featured paper works that were produced with an approach that was essentially experimental. As was evident from the variety of works on display, students were not limited to papermaking, but rather experimented with this ‘new’ medium to create sculptural works. Most of the art produced were objects or conceptual statements using paper as the material.

In one piece, for example, Walker Paterson interpreted the ‘paper theme’ through the use of a ‘readymade’. Paterson exhibited a found ‘paper’ object - a 5 litre cardboard wine-box - in a rather tongue-in-cheek work that made reference both to the spirit of the FLAT openings and a play on words. An inside joke for papermakers; in papermaking terminology, a thick sheet is referred to as ‘wine box cardboard.’ It was an ‘art object’ which required and indeed received much audience participation! In recent correspondence with Paterson we discussed the exhibition:

**Allen:** Could you talk about your motives for making the “Wine Box” for this exhibition?

**Paterson:** a) The Wine Box piece allowed people to come together over a glass of wine and discuss ideas. b) The piece was made of paper, which qualified it for the exhibition. c) When one makes a thick sheet of paper it is referred to as ‘wine box cardboard’ [in the papermaking process]. And d) It saved me from buying wine for the opening of the exhibition, the only reason why people would attend in the first place.

**Allen:** What is important about this ‘conceptual’ work when compared with the other ‘made’ work on this show, with specific reference to the papermaking department?

**Paterson:** The “Wine Box” was not about labour intensive work which paper-making is. I felt there was a lot of work on the show that spoke about labour intensive work and I did not want to add to it. That is why the two accompanying pieces remained in their raw state.<sup>28</sup>

Others artists who participated in the exhibition included Laura Faranacci, Suzanne Bothma-Hale, Christel Van Vollenhoven, George Holloway and Sam Cross. The image used for the poster of the exhibition showed Bothma-Hale’s sculpture made with wattle and paper.

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<sup>28</sup> Paterson, Allen; Interview 7, snail-mail, April 1998.



This show also marked the first time that the FLAT received art press from a Durban newspaper, and a prominent Durban artist and lecturer at the Technikon, John Roome, was invited to open an exhibition. The column by Marianne Meijer, which appeared in the *Tonight* section, of *The Daily News* read:

An exhibition of new paper work will go on show at the FLAT Gallery on Wednesday next week, at 6pm. The exhibition, which marks the fusion between the newly-introduced papermaking programme at Technikon Natal and the rising alternative art culture at the recently opened FLAT Gallery, will officially be opened by the only award winner at the Natal Arts Trust Biennale, John Roome. The FLAT Gallery, 4 Manor Court, Mansfield Road, is a non-profit, non-commercial exhibition space, where the prime aim is to promote a vibrant interaction among creative people. It is available for any innovative art event.<sup>29</sup>

This modest blurb was important in that the aims of the FLAT were here recorded in print with the public acknowledgement of the FLAT's goal: "to promote a vibrant interaction among creative people," and the declaration that "it is available for any innovative art event." For us this was milestone as it articulated in a public forum our policy of allowing anyone to do anything in the space. Moreover, in Durban, the primary source of art information released in the newspapers was at that time originating almost exclusively from the Durban Art Gallery and the NSA. As these were the two powerful, stalwart organisations, it was significant to us that we too were able to get press attention. It not only announced to the general public the fact that we existed, but also legitimized the FLAT for those with suspicions that our project was not just another elaborate student party. This recognition of our seriousness also affirmed the existence of the gallery for us.

In the months to come Marianne Meijer continued to support our efforts, consistently covering the FLAT gallery in her weekly column and coming to many of the exhibitions. Ironically, Meijer was considered by many of the younger Durban artists to be part of the 'establishment' and yet she was the first to support us in such early days.

In that same conversation with Paterson, we discussed the significance of Durban's first papermaking exhibition and the press coverage it received:

**Simon:** What do you think the significance is of John Roome opening this exhibition (in terms of legitimizing the gallery in the eyes of the 'art public' and/or the more 'established' artists)?

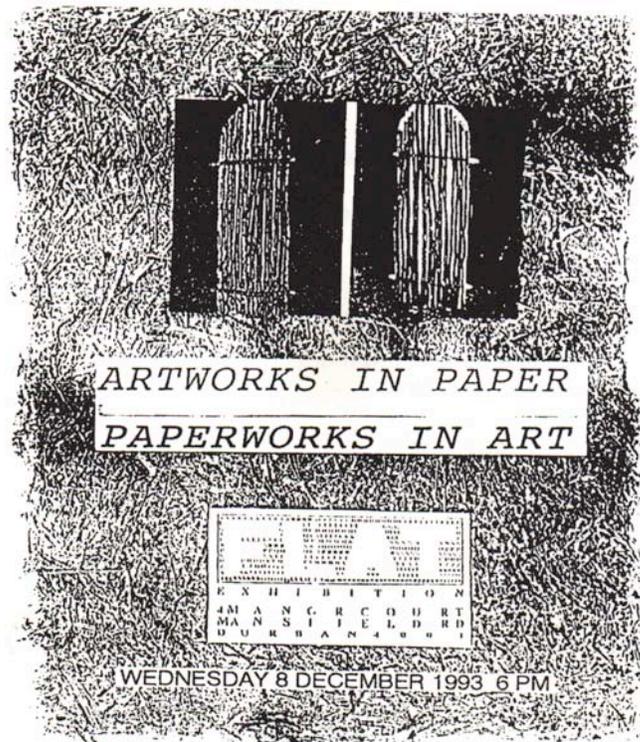
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<sup>29</sup> Marianne Meijer; *The Daily News Tonight*, Durban, December 3, 1993.

**Walker:** I found it quite surprising that John agreed to open the exhibition. I do however have my suspicions that John was more interested in legitimizing the use of paper as a fine art medium rather than a craft orientated one. It did however as you stated have the desired effect, it was published in Marianne's [Meijer] column.

**Simon:** Could you comment on the importance of this show to the newly formed papermaking department (this was its first year as a department with students) and to FLAT.

**Walker:** Both were relatively new additions to the Durban scene. It was also the first ever paper-making exhibition to be held in Durban.<sup>30</sup>



Exhibition poster, 1993

<sup>30</sup> Paterson, Allen; Interview 7, snail-mail, April 1998.

***THE FIRST TIME***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 1)***  
***December 1993***

This marks the first in a series of audio recordings. During the course of the FLAT, we began to tape our conversations. These became both a document of our ‘brainstorming sessions’ and raw material for later sound work. Barry, Vaughn<sup>31</sup> and myself messed around with an antique gramophone by playing the ‘non-playing’ side of a one-sided 33 RPM Schubert record (a shrill sound/noise) at 78 RPM. We also discussed possible ideas for recording music:

**Vaughn:** They should release a Butthole Surfers album on the old 78-speed format.

**Barry:** No fuck! We should do that.

**Vaughn:** You know PIL released a limited edition single with the hole misplaced on the record.<sup>32</sup>

***I’M RITE, I’M RONG***  
***Audio Recordings (Tapes 2 - 4)***  
***December 31, 1993***

These are recordings of conversations on New Years Eve, and featured voices that included Barry, Vaughn, Moonlight<sup>33</sup>, and myself. Vaughn was our downstairs neighbour who had become involved with the FLAT and was a key participant in the first sound recordings. Moonlight, a grounds-keeper at the Natal Technikon, had recently become a frequent visitor to the FLAT, when he and Barry became friends. The recordings on this particular evening captured what was not

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<sup>31</sup> Vaughn and Tracy were our downstairs neighbors and would frequent the FLAT often. I unfortunately cannot recall their surnames.

<sup>32</sup> ‘The First Time’; *FLAT Recordings*, Tape 1, Durban, FLAT, Dec 1993.

<sup>33</sup> I never knew Moonlight’s surname either.

uncommon under these circumstances. We four men, Vaughn, Moonlight, Thomas and myself, were drinking and talking about ‘women’.

Significant in the production of these tapes was the fact that they revealed not only the problematic nature of recording another’s voice and in particular a Black man’s voice, but also the use of such material in one’s own work. Though several hours of tapes were made, it was a particular set of phrases spoken by Moonlight that asserted themselves as highlights from the tape and were later used by me to create a looped sound work.

The phrases that were extracted are from some point in the evening when Moonlight revealed his thoughts on prostitution. He said:

[Sic] Now we are here in Sud Africa to talk da truth. Nobody getsuffishus. We are going to talk our aims... what dey we are concentrated... eh...

Black Ladies, just stopping to sell your body!

White Ladies, just stopping to sell your body!

Indian Ladies, just stopping to sell your body!

Eh... Coloured Ladies, just stopping to sell your body!

We are not allowed to selling dat. Accept da spirit of God!<sup>34</sup>

There were not only complexities inherent in the circumstances that led to Moonlight’s comments, but also in the later appropriation of his voice for a sound work. Though innocent in and of itself (the recording was not done in secret), this drunken exchange among four men was fraught with subtle dynamics. There was perhaps some suspect ‘encouragement’ that led to Moonlight’s declaration, and indeed, in South Africa, there is no exchange between black and white which is not charged with an undercurrent of racial self-consciousness. That these issues of race and gender were both so directly addressed in this ‘party atmosphere’ seemed also significant.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Moonlight; ‘New Years Eve’, *FLAT Recordings*, Tape 2, Durban, FLAT, December 31, 1993.

<sup>35</sup> See the essay *A Black Voice* (1997) where I address these issues more thoroughly, p. 307.



Barry & Moonlight, 1993



The Ostrich-Egg Beading workshop organized by Sam Ntshangase and Niel Jonker, 1994

## ***OSTRICH-EGG BEADING WORKSHOP*** ***January 1994***

At this time weaver, Sam Ntshangase, formed a small business with Niël Jonker, hence the FLAT became the site for a kind of 'workshop/commercial venture'. Jonker was one of the FLAT occupants and the son of an ostrich farmer from Oudtshoorn. Ntshangase was a teacher and weaver who we had originally met through Andries Botha in 1991, when he conducted weaving workshops at the Natal Technikon.

A prolific art-school teacher, instructing in three schools at the same time, Ntshangase had come not only to teach, but also to study art at the Technikon in 1992. With no permanent residence in Durban central, Ntshangase would often stay over at the FLAT, and so in a sense, became a semi-permanent flat-mate. Often he would come in after a full days work at the Technikon, sleep for a few hours and then leave at 3 am to drive to one of his schools down the South Coast. Well connected in the Zulu Royalty, he seemed to know everyone in both political and artistic circles, and these included a number of weavers in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

According to the business plan developed by Jonker and Ntshangase, Jonker would get box-loads of empty ostrich eggs from his father in Oudtshoorn, and Ntshangase would then find beadings to decorate these eggs. These would then be marketed either through international export or local shops. They approached the FLAT Gallery about using the space to make the eggs, and when all agreed, the production of these crafted items began. Three women came with their children one day to work and used the FLAT space rent-free for a weekend. As a result of these events, the FLAT operated not only as a residence and an exhibition/performance space, but also became a temporary community workshop site. It was our policy that anyone could use the space for anything, and so this included non-exhibition activities.

## ***FUNDING PROPOSAL sent to BAT February 2, 1994***

Moe, Barry and myself continued to direct the FLAT Gallery. In early 1994 Jonker moved out and I moved into his space to live. Moe and I decided, at that time, to divide the R 800 rent between us so that we might continue to designate the living room as the gallery. In order to alleviate the burden of the rent for the third room, we realized that we needed to find another source of funding. This led to a request to the Bartel Arts Trust.

The Bartel Arts Trust (BAT) was at that time a newly formed arts trust made possible by Hugo Bartel to support arts in Durban. Its trustees were Paul Mikula and Dick Breytenbach, and the director at that time was Mike Van Graan. The BAT centre had not yet been built, and so in an effort to support art in Durban, the trust funded many small arts endeavors.

In our proposal requesting funds, we articulated our primary aims for the gallery. This is the first time that we had formally declared these aims in a written format:

The FLAT Gallery has no selection system and there is no restriction on content of work - anyone can exhibit anything!

AIMS.

\* To create a vibrant space where artists (students and professionals) can exhibit, experiment and interact in an either non-formal or formal context by means of debate, informative talks, experimental work, group and solo exhibitions.

\* It is a neutral space which can operate on a professional yet not commercial level allowing both practicing artists to experiment with new ideas and students the opportunity to experience the gallery system.

\* In future we wish to develop greater communication with other artists, organisations and galleries in the R.S.A. and thus hope to establish a system where artists can have traveling exhibitions in various parts of the country etc.

\*All work on exhibition has been and will be documented.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Moe, Barry, Allen; Letter to BAT, Feb 2, 1994.

**FLAT**  
**4 MANOR CRT**  
**61 BOTANIC GRDS RD**  
**DURBAN 4001**

2 February 1994.

The Bartle Trust.

Dear Sirs,

RE: PROPOSAL FOR FUNDING.

The FLAT Gallery was initiated in October 1993 as an alternative art space and operated till the end of the year with fortnightly exhibitions. After the January break the FLAT Gallery will resume again with an exhibition of work by a young local artist David Southam on Friday the 4th of February 1994.

Response to the exhibitions and the concept of the FLAT has been enthusiastic both from the viewing public and from artists needing to exhibit.

At present the FLAT Gallery is being funded by young practising artists and students. It is a NON PROFIT PROJECT WITH NO GALLERY FEE CHARGED TO THE EXHIBITOR. We wish to maintain this policy of a free space in order not to hinder the exhibitor in any way. This policy also allows for a much wider viewing of artists and subsequently many more exhibitions.

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All work on exhibition has been and will be documented.

This proposal signed by Moe, Barry and myself, also included a list of artists who had up until that point exhibited at the gallery. This was a total of 16 people in 4 months. Also submitted was a breakdown of costs for a proposed average of 4 exhibitions per month:

Rental	R 400
Phone a/c inclusive Rental & Metered calls	R 100
Invitations (printing and postage)	R 400
Documentation	R 200
Gallery Maintenance (lighting, paint)	R 100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>R 1200 / month for one year</b> <sup>37</sup>

On the fourth of February, a week after we had sent our proposal into BAT we received a letter from Jennifer Whitehead acknowledging that the BAT had agreed to sponsor us and pledged R400 a month towards our operating expenses until further notice. Their only clause in the agreement was:

We ask that you acknowledge BAT's contribution by displaying the information in some manner in the gallery where the public will see it. Please include all of us on your mailing list - addresses as per attached sheet.<sup>38</sup>



The names on the list included Paul Mikula, Dick Breytenbach, Whitehead, and Van Graan.

With these funds from BAT, Moe and I were relieved of the financial burden of covering the entire rent and our part was then R200 each a month for our accommodation. We made a poster thanking BAT for their sponsorship and this “thank you” sign remained in the gallery at all times.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Whitehead; Letter to FLAT, Feb 9, 1994.

**DAVID SOUTHAM**  
**February 4, 1994**

David Southam, a third year student at the Technikon, decided, like Marrins, Strode and Fox before him, to have an exhibition at the FLAT. This process of exhibiting off-campus, initiated back in 1990 was by now common practice among younger students.

David Southam's show included painted and printed works with graphic symbols. A press release was sent to Marianne Meijer and she came to the exhibition and covered the show in her *Art Beat* column. The article included a photograph of Southam and his work, with Moe, Barry and myself. (The three primary FLAT gallery organizers at that time.) It read:

The gallery aims to create a platform for more experimental art; such as performance, installation, and video; **media the more established galleries may shy away from.**<sup>39</sup>

As was noted in this writing, we continued to be defined as an alternative space in contrast to the more established spaces in Durban, such as the Durban Art Gallery (DAG) and the Natal Society for the Arts (NSA).



Press cutting from Marianne Meijer's *Art Beat* column in *The Daily News*, 1994

<sup>39</sup> Marianne Meijer; *Art Beat*, *The Daily News - Tonight*, Durban, Feb 11, 1994.

***FUNDING PROPOSAL sent to DURBAN ARTS  
February 9, 1994***

Jeff Chandler, who was then president of the NSA, approached us at this time about applying to Durban Arts for money. Durban Arts was a well established organization that funded a broad range of cultural events. Chandler, who was a strong supporter of our endeavor, helped us prepare this letter for Noel Fairhurst (then director of Durban Arts):

The Flat Gallery was initiated in October 1993 as an alternative exhibition space. A non-profit-making venture, its aim is to create a vibrant space where students and professional artists can exhibit, experiment and interact.

The cost involved in exhibiting has become prohibitive. This not only precludes young or disadvantaged artists from the art public, but also from having any exposure and experience of the gallery system. There simply does not exist a support structure of any significance for the visual arts.

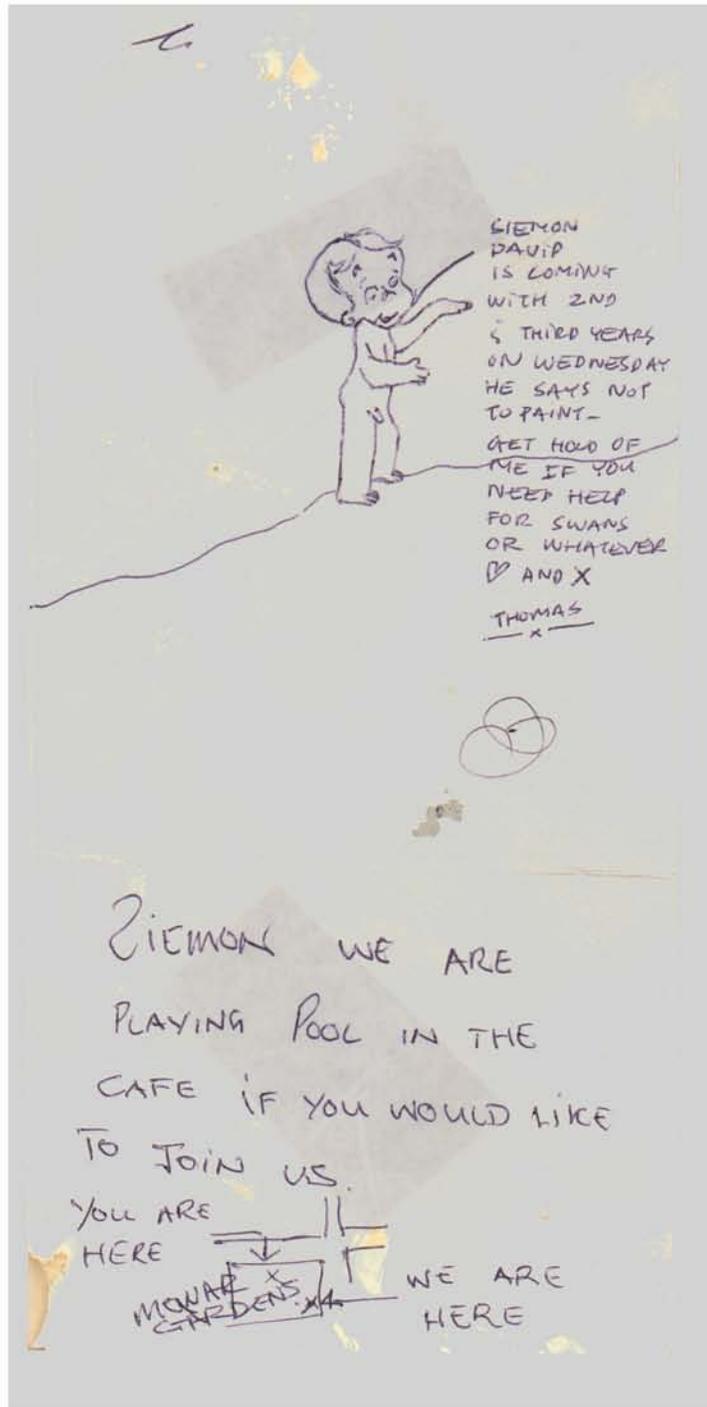
Our venture is by all accounts a modest one, but it does offer the opportunity for an artist to exhibit at no cost to themselves, other than expenses for the opening night and invitations. Last year the gallery hosted twelve exhibitions, including one by the noted critic and artist, Kendell Geers.

The rental costs of the gallery are born by the managing committee, who are co-signers of this proposal. Our request for funding entails the working cost of exhibitions, publicity and basic material needs for the presentation of art works:<sup>40</sup>

Here we asked for much less than in our BAT proposal: R790 a month, and received from the Durban Arts R300 a month for the period of one year. The letter was signed Moe, Barry and Allen.

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<sup>40</sup> Moe, Barry, Allen; Letter to Durban Arts, Feb 9, 1994.



A FLAT internal memorandum, 1994

**S  
W  
A  
N  
S**

**FRI 11 FEB 7:00PM**

**FLAT**

**4 MANOR CRT  
MANSFIELD RD**

S  
W  
A  
N  
S

## **SWANS** ***February 11, 1994***

From the first exhibition in October 1993 until February 1994, we had managed to mount a constant variety of events at the FLAT. With these precedents set and funding from outside sources, we felt an acute need to keep the momentum going. Our principle policy at the FLAT was to allow “anyone to do anything in the space”, and so testing this premise I decided at that time to orchestrate a minimal audio event.

My basic idea was to install large speakers in the gallery, publicize the event, and subject the audience to the loudest, most disturbing music that I could find; in this case, the aggressive band *Swans*. (Hence the title of the exhibition.) Though others in the FLAT, particularly Barry, were opposed to this plan, posters were made and displayed, none the less.

However, about three days before the event a disagreement occurred between Barry and I over the logistics of the evening, and this friction catalyzed a decision to orchestrate our first group event. This conflict in the group was in retrospect positive, for it created the energy for us to explore a new genre of art: performance art (or ‘happenings’). In an e-mail conversation with Barry he described the motivations for *SWANS* in this way:

**Allen:** How did *SWANS* come about?

**Barry:** We came back from the NSA after hanging an exhibition. I picked up a joker card at the gate of the Botanic Gardens. It started raining. I think we were a bit depressed about the show we’d just hung, and:

A: we hadn’t had a show for a while,

B: we wanted to maintain the record breaking amount/run of shows we’d notched up,

C: it was an idea,

D: none of the above.

**Allen:** How did it then develop from there?

**Barry:** We talked about it, then we did it, wait its coming to me... I think it was something like this: “We don’t have anything for next week yet, ohmygod, lets just play music... Let’s just play *SWANS* until everyone leaves. We can’t just play music so let’s have a restaurant. We can just photocopy some food. We can make menus. Then people order, but they don’t know what they’re

getting... I can't write... Jay can write. Yes, good... Well, we can use body parts and play the music very loud... OK... Good let's get to work.<sup>41</sup>

Our collaboration began when we agreed to all work together on a performance for that evening using the working title of *SWANS* as our theme. It was determined that we would build this performance around the original *Swans* noise music. We decided that it would be a multi-faceted event, in which we would each be doing different things around our individual interpretations of the central theme of 'swans'.

A unifying idea, however, developed and this was the notion of converting the 'swan' into a consumable food. This then evolved into the idea to make the FLAT space into a *faux*-restaurant for the evening. Tables and chairs were laid out, with the plan that the audience would enter the space like restaurant patrons and sit down at set tables while the noise played on. In a subtle reference to the common practice of providing refreshment at openings, here 'waiters' served wine to the 'customers'. A 'menu' (the only surviving document of the event) was created by Jay Horsburgh and Barry.

The text for the menu, provided by Horsburgh, was laced with Barry's drawings and diagrams. Formatted to resemble a menu, the content addressed what was more poetic than edible, an example of poetry created through the process of 'cut-ups'. The cover read:

...once having dissected a bird, long (remember) its nautical confirmation: the ease with which every-thing about a ship is mimicked, with the thoracic cage in the form of a hull and the assemblage of the ribs upon the keel, the stem or the ships bow of the breastbone, the scapular girdle where the wing's oar slips in, and the pelvic girdle where the poop erects itself...<sup>42</sup>

Horsburgh, who had just returned from Canada, where he had been living for the last seven years; was introduced to us by his neighbor, Melissa Marrins. Though only twenty years old at the time, he was very well informed about many historical avant-garde movements, and engaged in reading a number of literary texts. He became an active participant in the gallery at this stage. The texts that he brought to our attention on the Dadaists, the Situationists and the writings of the Beat poets among others, proved to be highly influential in the continuing evolution of the FLAT project.

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<sup>41</sup> Barry, Allen; Interview 10, e-mail, cyberspace, Nov 2, 1998.

<sup>42</sup> Horsburgh; *SWANS Menu*, Durban, FLAT, Feb 11, 1994.

Horsburgh, who saw himself as both a writer and an actor, had a particular interest in the work and the literary strategies of William Burroughs. With Barry, he re-visited the surrealist technique of automatic writing and worked with another experimental writing process known as ‘cut-ups’.

Burroughs, in an essay titled, *The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin* speaks not only about the cut-up method, but also its historical precedents with the Surrealists. He describes what may be seen as its birth in performance:

At a Surrealist rally in the 1920s, Tristan Tzara, the man from nowhere, proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat. A riot ensued and wrecked the theater. Andre Breton expelled Tzara from the movement and ground the ‘cut-ups’ on the Freudian couch.<sup>43</sup>

He goes on to follow the historical development for the ‘cut-up’, and to assert that this seemingly random method results not in ‘nonsense’, but rather in some new ‘meaning’. He writes about Brion Gysin, an artist working in the late 50s:

In the summer of 1959, Brion Gysin, painter and writer, cut newspaper articles into sections and rearranged the sections at random. ‘Minutes to Go’ resulted from this initial cut up experiment. ‘Minutes to Go’ contains unedited unchanged cut-ups emerging a quite coherent meaningful prose.<sup>44</sup>

The connection between collage and cut-ups is here noted, and this is important when one considers the use of ‘cut-up’ as a process that can operate across media. At the FLAT, artists had for sometime engaged in various practices that employed collage of **visual** images. Marrins had in her work, for example brought Madonna and Venus together with her own contemporary image. De Menezes had cut up found logos and signs from an ordinary phone book. In both, images were isolated and recombined to create new meanings.

But it was the introduction of the ‘cut-up’ as a literary tool that brought even more radical possibilities to the FLAT. This was important not only in the ‘literary’ works such as the *SWANS Menu*, but in the application to later sound material. Many of the sampled sound works that were to follow were created with variations on this basic ‘cut-up’ technique.

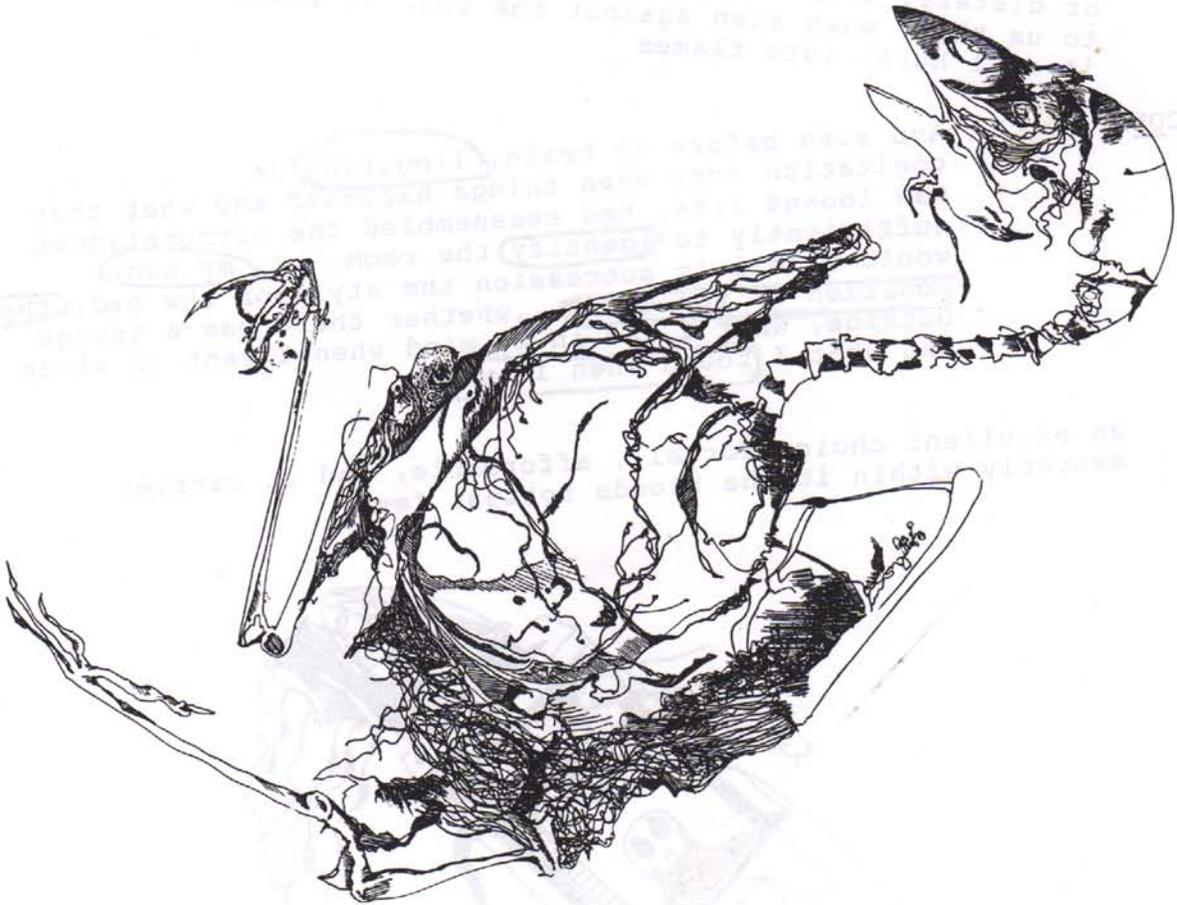
Burroughs addresses the connection between collage and ‘cut-ups’:

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<sup>43</sup> William Burroughs; ‘The Cut-up Method of Brion Gyson’, *Burroughs, Gysin & Throbbing Gristle*, RESEARCH, # 4/5, San Francisco, Vale & Juno, 1983.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

# Menu For SWANS



(...once having dissected a bird, long (remember) its nautical confirmation: the ease with which every thing about a ship is mimicked, with the thoracic cage in the form of a hull and the assemblage of the ribs upon the keel, the stem or the ship's bow of the breastbone, the scapular girdle where the wing's oar slips in, and the pelvic girdle where the poop erects itself...)

breakFAST

The spell recited over a certain object, subjected to the cause-to-be-split ritual, and left in a hidden part of the forest to lie there

SWANS FIRST MEAL:

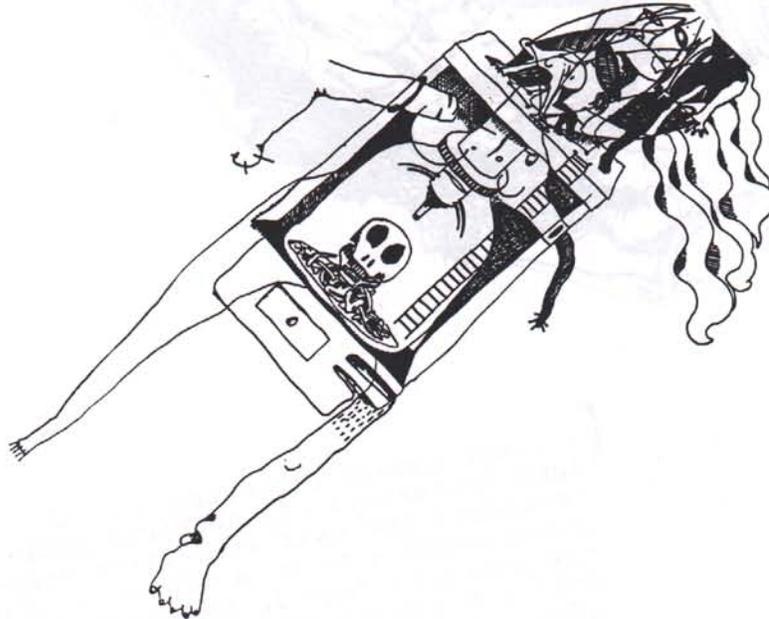
Nothing remains of it now but the crypt, into which Theodore has probably taken you, for Gilbert burned all the rest

this pleasant opener is perfect for the fatigued or dietary. while very cheap, it seems so weightless to us that, when seen against the sun, it looks as if it will burst into flames

SWANS SECOND:

And even before my brain, lingering in cogitation over when things happened and what they had looked like, had reassembled the circumstances sufficiently to identify the room, it, my body, would recall in succession the style of the bed, the position of the doors...whether there was a assage outside, what I had in my mind when I went to sleep and what I found when I awoke

an excellent choice for all, affordable, and it carries secretly within it the bloods hottest fever



SWANS THIRD:

There is still the memory of the day to come, the memory of atrocious adventures in a fog fit for a changed man

the chefs choice. served with the finest white wine and garnished with the delicate muscles of swans

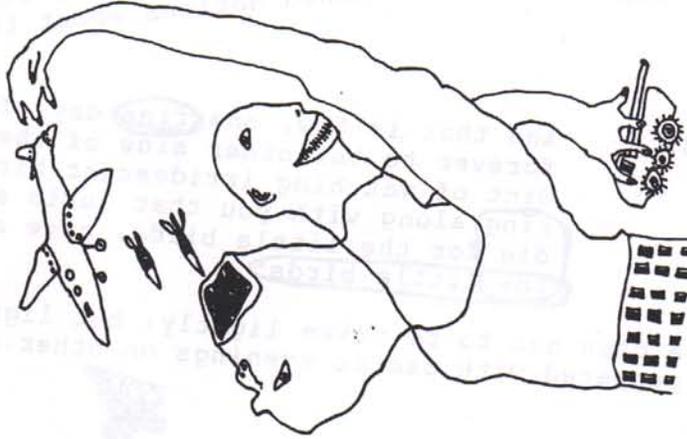
LUNCH

A supernatural sanction for enforcing repayment of a gift

SWANS FOURTH:

...who, in her curiosity to know what <sup>the</sup> marker indicated had begun to read the clinical account of these pains, and was violently sobbing now thAT it was a question of a prototype patient with whom she was unacquainted

swans noontime speciality. highly recommended for the discerning pallette



SWANS FIFTH MEAL:

Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder blades, offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept, while unseen rooms whirled around it in the dark.

a true lunch known to be more nocturnal to humankind than is the great night of clear dreaming wherein the dreams logic operates

SWANS SIXTH:



He is so perfectly alone that he is excepted from the whole. He watches the spines of books becoming rounded. He listens to the music that shines his shoes. At noon, sometimes he smiles twelve times. Onto all his sensations he slips the handcuffs of a smile

a large meal, price negotiable, served with a brevity of wings

DINN?ER  
A bond of souls, because the thing itself has a soul....This food, these goods give a magical hold over you...Finally, the thing given is not inert.

SWANS SEVENTH:

But still, what a silly exam! I would have got through it if I had to, if it were not for that little history question. How lucky I was not a candidate.

a wonderful introduction to a romantic evening. lovers, you'll love it. a little more expensive, it manages to defy all the established notions about thermo-dynamics

SWANS EIGHTH EATS:

And that is how, one fine day, I crossed over forever to the other side of the rainbow by dint of watching iridescent birds...I reuse to sing along with you that lurid song: "We die for the little birds, give a feast to the little birds"

a dish not to be taken lightly, but lightly peppered with exotic evenings on other shores

SWANS LAST MEAL:

This desert is a fake. The shadows I dig let colours show through like so many useless secrets. I will, they say, see is hear. Silence as far as as I will, they see is the keyboard that starts with these Twenty fingers that are not "consummate", as one well statured patron described this remarkable dish. bought at a high but not uncommon price, you'll soar to immense summits of satisfaction, knowing that you've left in your airy path the scandal of terrestrial seasons that know combustion but no grace. a must.



FIN.

The cut up method brings to writers the collage, which has been used by painters for fifty years. You cannot will spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable, spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors.<sup>45</sup>

The power of the 'cut-up', however, goes beyond its assertion as a new process and even its claim to be a tool for accessing new meanings. There was implicit in its methodology (or lack of one) something that seemed resonant with the spirit of the FLAT. Indeed, for Tzara, this process speaks to the idea of 'anti-mastery' and hints at some almost political egalitarianism; an art for everyone as Burroughs points out.

Tzara said. "Poetry is for everyone." Cut-ups are for everyone. Anybody can make cut-ups. It is experimental in the sense of being 'something to do'. Right here write now. Not something to talk and argue about.<sup>46</sup>

For the *SWANS* performance, Barry, Moe and I dressed as waiters in tuxedos and offered the audience/diners the 'cut-up' menu. When each made a selection, we then brought them photostatted, cut-out body parts. These 'starters' included hearts, lungs, and kidneys, etc. The chef's specialty was a concoction made up of a plate of chains (posing as pasta) and a show-room dummy dressed like a cooked pig. The disturbing sounds of *Swans* created an audio equivalent to the implicit violence of this 'cannibalistic' event. Later in the evening, in keeping with the disjointed unpredictable nature of the evening *Moonlight* in an impromptu participatory act changed the 'sound track'. Barry recalled:

*Moonlight* arrived late in the running with a jazz cassette and insisted on playing it, the evening had acquired somewhat aggressive overtones, and I think this helped to dissipate the energy in quite a positive way, but this could be a substance induced delusion.<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile, Horsburgh and Yvette De Bruin, an artist visiting from Pretoria, sat in opposite corners of the room facing each other. Jay, half-naked, had combed peanut butter through his hair, while De Bruin was dressed as a nurse. Above Horsburgh's head hung a Vermeer painting and a hot bulb. The heat from the bulb made the peanut butter burn and smell. De Bruin, in contrast, was cooled by a small fan that steadily blew air. Each sat silent and still for the entire

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Barry, Allen; Interview 10, e-mail, cyberspace, Nov 2, 1998.

‘performance’. It was as if scenes from different plays had been ‘cut-up’ and collaged; presented simultaneously in order that they might collide and therefore create a new narrative.

All at the same time, wine was consumed, viewers were served (with ‘images’), two performers engaged in some private acts unmindful of the audience, and a deafening music roared. In an assault on the senses, these combined to create a kind of ‘total’ experience.

In the book, *Total Art - Environments, Happenings and Performance*, Adrian Henri discusses the importance of Richard Wagner’s idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or ‘total art work’

Such a work like one of Wagner’s music-dramas, sets out to dominate, even overwhelm, flooding the spectator/hearer with sensory impressions of different kinds. It is not meant as information but as an experience.<sup>48</sup>

Writing about the redefinition of ‘theatricality’ in installation and the happenings/performances of the 1960’s, Nicholas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry also make reference to Richard Wagner’s notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. They point to the connection between these contemporary art forms and his ideal of some creative synthesis of poetry and music. However, though they locate the roots of contemporary installation/performance within the, “visual and dynamic framework of the operatic stage” articulated by Wagner; they seem to regard his conception as incomplete and the term “theatrical” as inadequate. Instead they employ the term “carnival”, a notion explored in some depth by the Russian Linguist Mikhail Bakhtin.

Linguist, Julia Kristeva in the context of an essay on Bakhtin, spoke to this conception of the ‘theatrical’ that spills out of the stage. And defines the carnival as:

a spectacle, but without a stage; a game, but also a daily undertaking...The scene of the carnival, where there is no stage, no ‘theater, is thus both stage and life, game and dream, discourse and spectacle.<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the multi-faceted aspect of the *SWANS* event, with several actions going on at once, was not unlike a three-ring circus. Though operating as a total sensory event, the idea of the ‘carnival’ perhaps provided a more appropriate model than the ‘staged’ opera, in which to describe such examples of performances that operated outside the domains of conventional theater.

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<sup>48</sup> Adrian Henri; *Total Art - Environments, Happenings and Performance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974.

<sup>49</sup> Oxley, Perry, de Olivera; *Installation Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1994. p. 8.

Bakhtin's description of the carnival and his explorations of the 'carnavalesque' define an essential aspect as being what he called 'the material bodily principle' which he says is connected to 'grotesque realism'. Michael Gardiner in his seminal book on Bakhtin elaborates by saying:

This can be characterized as the incorporation of images depicting the material functions of the human body (eating drinking, defecation, copulation) into cultural or artistic texts.<sup>50</sup>

The *SWANS* performance, with its multi levels of experience, spoke to the intentions of 'total theater'. Divergent as were the themes explored, all were unified in the locus of 'the body': The sounds and smells, the consumption of wine and 'food', the effects of heat and cool, the visceral and the assaultive.

Meijer in her *Art Beat* column described the event as "a graphic expose of the consumption of art, food and prosthetics."<sup>51</sup> While Therese Owen, writing for the *Weekly Mail*, addressed the way in which the FLAT sought to engage with its viewers in a manner that was not passive; and captured the pandemonium of the evening:

There is a world going on underground, or in the studio flat belonging to Ledelle Moe to be more precise. Ledelle Moe together with fellow artists and best friends Siemon Allen and Thomas Barry have been holding some interesting and at times bizarre exhibits and there are no restrictions or boundaries in the gallery. People drink red wine, examine the art - which sometimes examines them - and generally a good time is had by all. The FLAT Gallery has become popular amongst the younger art crowd and is definitely working as an alternative to the more established galleries.<sup>52</sup>

The production of *SWANS* affirmed what would become now at the FLAT, a move away from the conventional presentation of sculpture or painting. The wall between viewer and performers fell, and it was in some ways indicative of our efforts to also collapse the barriers between our lives and our art. In the work that followed soon after this watershed event we continued to explore 'life as art' and to question the formal restriction of making studio-based work.

In conversation with Barry and then with Moe, each recalled the events:

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Gardiner; *The Dialogics of Critique - Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology*, London, Routledge, 1992. p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Marianne Miejer; Art Beat, *The Daily News Tonight*, Durban, Feb 18, 1994.

<sup>52</sup> Therese Owen; *The Weekly Mail*, Johannesburg, Feb 18, 1994.

**Allen:** What do you remember about the *SWANS* performance?

**Barry:** The playing of *Swans* only (except for Moonlight's cassette). Yvette in a green dress with a green wig. We (J S T) ran the restaurant (I think we even got tables from Sculpture) dishing up the photocopies randomly based on what people ordered, there was also the legs and a long chain billed spaghetti, and some vegetables. Do you have a copy of the menu? You'll find some answers in there.

**Allen:** Can you talk about the menu you and Jay compiled?

**Barry:** Some of the images came out of my red book. I can't remember exactly, maybe under hypnosis, possibly also a book Jay was reading at the time & some of his writing.<sup>53</sup>

**Moe:** *SWANS* was this impromptu evening. The name came from an album that Siemon played at the event, the entire evening. It was this hectic, grinding music. Between Jay, Thomas, myself and Siemon we organised this funky old pool table with some weird-arse, looking mannequin. It was some sort of a dinner-party environment where people would sit down as though they were going to have dinner at this strange table.

**Allen:** Well, we converted the FLAT into a *faux*-restaurant.

**Moe:** So say you are looking at the FLAT, there was this table with a number of chairs. Everyone [the audience] was seated and there was this noise going on. And in the right hand corner was Jay on a chair. And in the left hand corner opposite Jay was Thomas' friend from Pretoria, Yvette, in a nurses outfit. There was a dialogue between the two of them. And Jay had combed peanut butter into his hair in this stylized kind of...style. So we put a light on him which started baking the peanut butter making it smell. Right next to him was a picture of a Vermeer painting, of the woman pouring the milk. He was wearing the white like chef outfit. Yvette was in a nurse's outfit with a fan blowing on her. What it meant, nobody really knew....

**Allen:** They were like ornaments in the exhibition. They just sat there quietly while everybody engaged... It was like a participatory event where the whole FLAT was arranged like a restaurant. You would sit down and get a menu and you would be served wine like in a restaurant (or at an opening). You were then asked what you would like to choose from the menu, which was designed by Jay and Thomas... Somebody would choose for example number three and we would bring out prosthetics and weird stuff. Stuff that looked like food - photocopies of food. It was a really crazy event. The whole time there was this incredible noise [*Swans*]. Everyone got really drunk... We were all dressed up in tuxedos as waiters....

**Moe:** That was another thing, we really got dressed up for it. I think that night Thomas wore a dress for the event.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Barry, Allen; Interview 10, e-mail, cyberspace, Nov 2, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> MacKenny, Moe, Buster, Allen; Interview 9, Washington, Aug 24, 1998.