THE FLAT GALLERY

(1993 – 1995)

THE FLAT GALLERY

A DOCUMENTATION AND CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF AN INFORMAL ART ORGANISATION IN DURBAN

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With a foreword by
JAY HORSBURGH

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2. Alternative Spaces
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4. Experimental Art Spaces

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FOREWORD
By Jay Horsburgh[*]

Perhaps one sometimes forgets that galleries are not castles in the air, that they did not grow like capacious wallflowers from the cities in which one finds them, full of busy activity and in full pollination. One forgets that the gallery is very much a modern shape. Derivative of the implications of contemporary existence, it is built as it were from plies of pressure stripped from the world about it. As such the gallery is an interior space and obeys the laws of all urban interior spaces as much as any other only more so.

And when the gallery is the dimension of a thumbnail, when it is the native realm for those who give it direction, this exacerbation of laws of the interior strains the cannon until it cracks, and it is in the reflections upon such miniature breakings, such as are collected here in this volume, that we are privy to the essential character of interiors. That it should illuminate a little of the world around it is of course the delectable consequence. But in order for us to appreciate exactly how the thumbnail wallflower breaks a little of the worlds facade we must first understand precisely the import of its existence. And not in any general way. We must understand the import of its existence to the individual who resides within it, to those who have something of themselves invested within it. But of course, we can't understand this "something of themselves" without quarrelling over the question of what precisely them selves are. But here we are greeted providentially, for it seems as though the self invested and the vesture of the space are not in any way divested of one another. Each is, in fact, corollary of the other, and by pursuing this line of thought we will perhaps determine the potency of affect that these spaces effect not only within the cities where we live, but within our bodies, our selves.

The splicing of the world's textures into public and private spaces is not only the invention of history, it is probably the first declaration of the self. I posses room, I know a shelter, and the "I" in this sentence is made real beyond the simple declaration "I am", which, correlative of nothing, limps in its own echo. Indeed, it is within the private space that this "I" is, as it were, made substantial. No longer am I, no longer will I figure myself, but that I am here. For language,

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[*] Horsburgh's *Introduction* appears here unedited in its original format. All grammar and spelling are as they appear on the photocopied draft which was handed to me by Jenah McCarthy in August of 1997.

with this word “here”, deals it’s person into the world. In itself, existence is characterized by a whiff of impersonality. And to dwell as one’s self within the private sphere implies a far more potent issue than existence: it implies person-ality.

Within the private space, within the dwelling, my person speaks itself, is identical with it’s words; thinking within the dwelling is a complex, individuated affair - thinking with a public most emphatically is not. Now, to dwell within a private space means to evolve person-ality, and to be a person implies a certain amount of interior content. This interior stuff is the content beyond privacy, is the personal matter, and it is more often than not that, whether understood as solace, reflection, meditation, or desire, we experience this interior content as being quite identical with the private dwelling, and we ascribe a battery of handles to this experience of *consubstantiation* with the dwelling, to the degree that we say “home is where the heart is,” or we are “feeling at home,” etc. It is evident that the dwelling contains more than native trinkets, it is actually in certain measure the making of one’s own texture, one’s emotional and spiritual mettle.

What then transpires when the private dwelling is made public? Obviously, in publicizing one’s realm of retreat, one is also publicizing something of one’s solace, reflection, meditation and desire. One is doing more than making a name - one is, in a real sense, making the quality of one’s personhood identical with the flow of publicness beyond one’s privacy. It is beyond the experience of gathering in a neutral zone, it is the demonstration of where the self and the social are plicated upon one another, are wefted into a mutual substance of inspiration and accommodation.

Well then, it is easy to see how this publicizing of personal space is in fact the nursery of art. The very act of revealing an interior content is the infancy of art, and to be an artist is, among other things, to nurse your interior publicly. How demonstrable then is the process of suckling in this nursery that we observe when we enter as a public body into a private dwelling! This intersection will always necessitate a minimal aesthetic sense, and aesthetic sense is, after all, the only sense by which we do not receive the world, but express our sensibility.

This phenomenon is not confined to galleries and showrooms. From the cave paintings of Southern Africa and Western Europe to the post-colonial residences-cum-coffee houses-cum-banking halls of Vancouver and Sydney, the act of making an interior, once-private realm public determines a basic, an all-too-basic beautification. Certainly, the proliferation of such spatial inversions in the late twentieth century will lead to a certain devaluation of the aesthetic sense, a watering down of the quality of selfhood expressed. This is precisely the area in which the ethical retaliation of a space such as the Flat Gallery resides.

Practically speaking, from the outside, what is most important about an interior space is accessibility. The fashion in which a private area is entered is quite as important as what is sought within. This is primarily because experience is a progression of unveilings, and although the revealing is of an object, the object of the revealing is always the revealing itself. The marvelous subterranean labyrinths developed by the cults of Osiris, down which an initiate would be tugged with a head lit up by old grapes, toward a painted statuette of the divine image, was a parody of this revealing. As was, it is speculated, part of the purpose served by certain cave paintings of ten to thirty thousand years ago. And this labyrinthine disorientation in search of a true image is roughly equivalent to how we descend into ourselves through the tortuous and the tortile after a personal or an emotional truth.

To understand, then, the value of revealing an interior space, we must think of it in terms of what everything is thought of today - it's point of access, i.e. in terms of what it costs. It is telling that today this exact pageant of disorientation is best demonstrated by the organs of public government: beaurocratic halls, offices of the law, banks, nightclubs, cinemas, etc. This implies, of course, that truth has come to be seen as a matter of governmental, capital-oriented, or simulated experience. And today the whole comedy of access to interiors has become eminently more complicated and eminently more facile in that the global necessity of urban residence has succeeded in opening-up and relativizing the act of entrance. Entering a gallery, just as entering a night-club, becomes as much an issue of cost and accessibility as the essential game within. The idea of pilgrimage, for example, has on a large scale been annexed by travel agencies, to the extent that it has been divided into a progression of revealings-within-comfort. If one seeks the arduous path to the mountain one is no longer trundling with a poemful of tale-telling characters, one is very much on one's own.

So, that the conditions of access today should condition our expectations as to the interior of a place comes as no surprise. And once again, the very proliferation of interiors whether it be in population or structures has rendered their contents slightly bland. This applies equally to the "message" of an interior content, and we have to admit that in at least one sense the story of contemporary art has been a sordid whisper describing the evolution in convenience or lack thereof of message. This evolution, or devolution, is not the intellectual notion everyone seems to pretend it is: it is the real consequence of urbanization, accessibility, cost, and the fungus-like growth of a spongy, identical culture in the shape of the gallery that has driven art in this direction. So something like Dante's villains, the architects of this growth have taken upon them the exhibiting of the less happy motivations in our human psyche, and something like Dante, we the

public come to view the gallery as a tad infernal, abandoning hope of experiential meaning as we enter, and we brace ourselves for the sign that declares “meaning is present”, or vice-versa, and check the time as we hear a sallow confession of public amity, carefully conserving our ticket stubs later not so much out of the hoarding instinct but as the index of an ethical survival.

Similarly, the cafe, the bank, the law office aspires in its creative presentation to a meagre titillation, roughly co-extensive with the comfort-zone. In this respect the growth of interior design as an industry signifies the growth of basically uniform interiors: an interior space planned from without by the juristic person that is the design corporation. More horribly, it indicates a general aspiration to uniformity between private spaces, interior matters, and public areas. In a certain sense, it dissolves the divisions between these things and compels all to liability before the ideas of cost and taste. X has taste, we say, that is cost-effective, and feel a twinge of divination as to X’s interior character, his or her interior *decoration* .

What is obvious is that the situation of today’s galleries should give us several pauses in respect of their practicality, even if this undertakes at the cost of insight. And while considering these issues we suddenly strike upon what is perhaps the true benefit of the small, live-in gallery space: that such a space, ignoring a key component of accessibility, i.e. cost, liberates the liability of the content. This is of course well known, and is universally accepted as the benefit of such spaces. But what do we see beyond this idea of liberated content? Quite simply, *a hope for the interior*. And in this context, make no mistake, that means one thing: a hope for the self. Not only is messaging restored to the greater responsibility of the experience, but this responsibility transcends the aesthetic experience. Indeed, the whole process of entering is no longer the cost-effective one akin to the mental process of justification on moral grounds, but becomes far closer to the intimate act of inspiration. And the responsibility of the experience acquires this intimacy, so that no longer is it a matter worthy or unworthy of trouble, but an interior space crucial in its import, sanctioned by that movement which always lurks beneath intuition, an ethical movement.

The search for the internal truth thus steps out of painted corridors lined with enticing dips and plastic flowers, and becomes a matter for whom preservation is an arduous and ethical choice. If it is at all true that publicizing a private space clarifies the intersection between selfhood, domain, and sociality, then the ethical preservation of the interior becomes the preservation of the uniqueness that the self implies, its difference from uniformity, its singular character, its art. That is the true import of the small, live-in gallery: it is the art of individuality within turn of the millenium capitalist metropoli.

Siemon Allen, Ledelle Moe, and Thomas Dry Barry lived in the Flat Gallery. To be sure, there was a steady drift of others, but ultimately it was built about their personalities, their effort, and yes, their courage. For let us not mince talk - to open up one's space is an affirmation of ethical responsibility, and this affirmation is exactly what courage is. Those, like myself, who performed or exhibited here, have them to thank for the freedom of content that derived from their own sense of urgency. What you have in your hands is a document of a few individuals' will to counter the thousandfold obstructions inherent in the making of art in their country, let alone their city. Consequently you are also holding a certain measure of that cities blood, its aspirations, its true interior.

July 1995

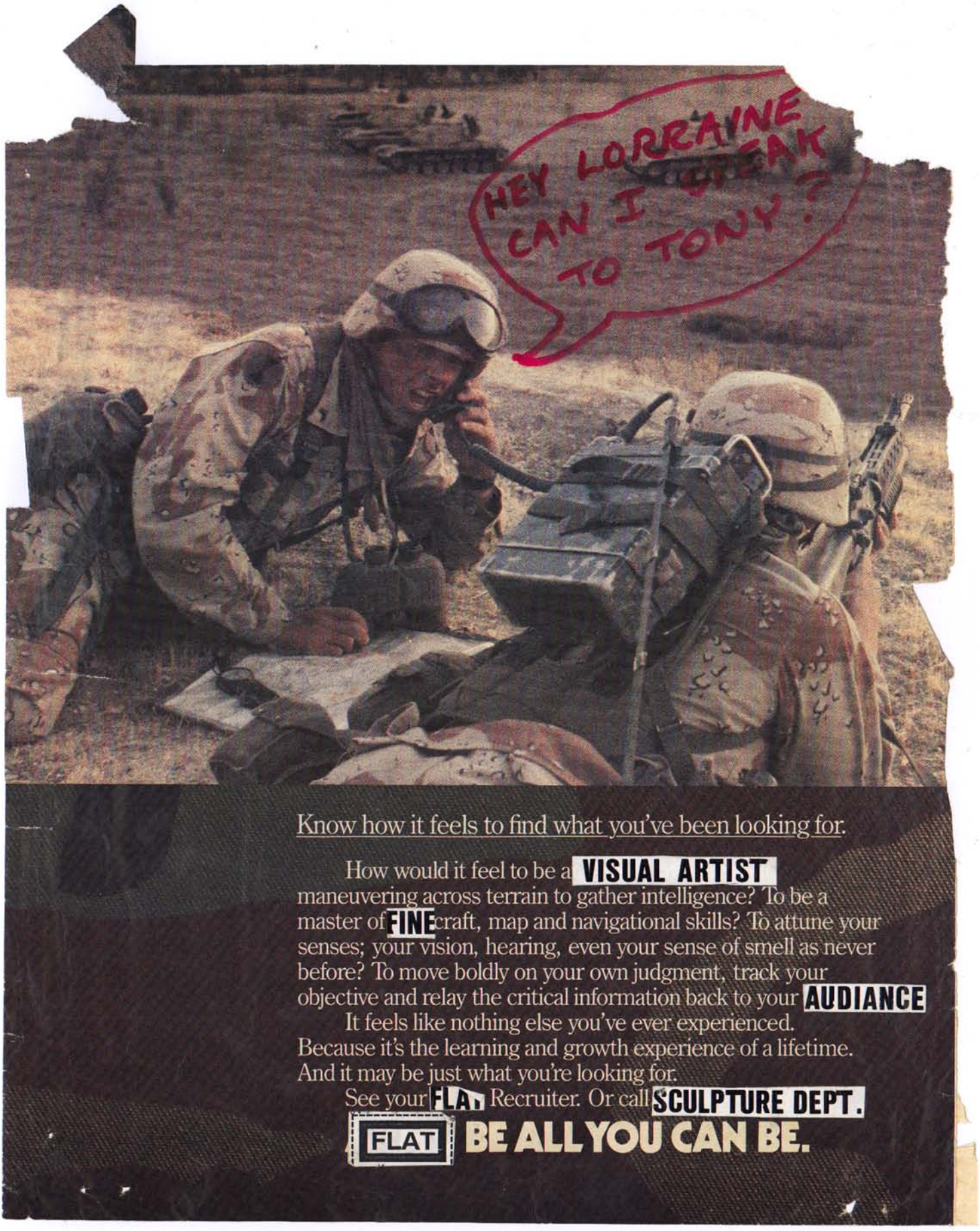
AUTHOR'S NOTE

In July of 1997, I took a break from my research in the United States and my work on this dissertation to visit the summer exhibitions in Europe. It was a particularly fruitful time to view contemporary art because *Documenta X*, *The Venice Biennale* and *Münster Projects* all coincided that year. At the Venice Biennale, in the Austrian Pavilion, I stumbled upon a rather unusual exhibition that left me with an impression more lasting than anything else I was to see.

Stacked floor to ceiling in an empty gallery room were thick paperback catalogues chronicling the activities of the Wiener Gruppe (Vienna Group), self-named in 1959. This 'artwork', which was described as "50,000 books with 800 pages each" was offered for the viewer's taking and presented with this question:

> *How can we show today what avant-garde was then? How can we reconstruct events that are now lost in space and time?*

That the exhibitors had chosen to print and distribute a book documenting the work of the Wiener Gruppe rather than mounting a conventional display of paintings and sculptures seemed appropriate to the spirit of the multi-faceted artistic production of the group. It affirmed for me my own commitment to create a document that would chronicle and contextualize the loose group of artists that came together in Durban from 1993 to 1995 at the FLAT. I was struck with the realization that to document history is to unavoidably invent history, but with that humbling thought returned to my task with a renewed sense of purpose.



FLAT - BE ALL YOU CAN BE, A promotional poster 'détourned' from a US Army advertisement, 1994.

INTRODUCTION

> *But why bother sharing lives? Why not just share studios and chat at the local bar (which we did as well)? Because art shows up in living. If it doesn't show up in living then it's just symbols.* [1]

The FLAT Gallery, housed in an apartment on Mansfield Road in Durban, South Africa was founded in October of 1993 by the apartment occupants: Ledelle Moe, Niël Jonker, Thomas Barry, and myself (Siemon Allen). Born out of a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the existing art scene in Durban and the need to take a more proactive approach in creating exhibition opportunities, the FLAT became a site for exhibitions, performances, multi-media 'events', as well as a place for a broad range of creative exchanges. Running parallel[2] to the political developments in South Africa that led to the historical elections of April 1994, the FLAT Gallery boasted 32 exhibitions/events over a period of 16 months, bringing a vital 'alternative' voice to the cultural climate of Durban. Young artists, students, recent graduates, as well as established artists and those working outside of institutions were all given the opportunity to participate and all came to explore their work in ways that might not otherwise have been possible in the limited or more restricted conditions that existed in the region's few established venues.

The FLAT's mission to promote a vibrant interaction amongst creative individuals began as a project to mount exhibitions without censure and to maintain a free space without the traditional selection system. This policy of unrestricted content and open format, however, also fostered a climate for experimentation and so an environment was created that proved to be fertile with potential for collaboration and interaction. It was a phenomenon that appeared and then evolved out of the creative needs of the artists who founded the project and those who later participated. The FLAT became a site for a kind of creative activity that had been unknown or at least unexplored in Durban at that time.

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[1] Bruno Fazzolari, 'Makers and Doers: Towards a Definition of Community', *Artweek*, Vol. 24, April 1993, p.18.
[2] Significanlty, the FLAT Gallery was initiated 8 months before the elections and closed 8 months after the elections.

In addition to being a place for highly experimental programs, the FLAT was an alternative space that operated 24 hours a day 7 days a week. Though the 'lounge' served as the main gallery, the apartment occupants often gave up their living spaces for special events. The exhibition space doubled as a studio-work site such as the time when a group of young students visiting Durban from a rural area used the space for a day-long impromptu workshop. Openings often led to conversations between artists and viewers that extended well into the night. Without set hours of operation, the FLAT was an informal art space where spontaneity ruled and the lines between the artists' 'lives' and the project's 'programmes' were blurred. What occurred at the FLAT was a breaking down of barriers between art and life - between artists and viewers. In stretching the definition of what exhibition or performance could be, the artists involved with the FLAT gallery discovered that observation and participation could become synonymous.

In this research paper I will begin my examination of the FLAT Gallery by first defining what is meant by an 'alternative space' and by looking at the historical development of such spaces both in South Africa and the United States of America.

This will include an investigation into the ideological motivations and socio-political influences behind such spaces as well as an exploration of what is meant by 'alternative practice' (which I believe is inseparable from the mission of the 'alternative space.') This is by no means a comprehensive survey of alternative spaces in South Africa or the United States, but rather a tracing of the phenomenon with relevant examples.

Through this historical study I will identify important precedents for the FLAT project as well as draw comparisons between the FLAT and other similar venues. I will then examine the particular circumstances that catalyzed the FLAT Gallery in the specific cultural and historical context of Durban, South Africa in 1993 and 1994.

Most importantly, I will construct a chronological documentation of the FLAT Gallery's programme including interviews and extensive visual and audio archives. With this archival information and with detailed descriptions of each event, exhibition or performance, I will create a 'geneology' for the FLAT Gallery by exploring the historical influences and linkages that I believe existed between the FLAT projects and specific examples of artist-motivated projects such as the Cabaret Voltaire and the Situationists.[3]

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[3] In this way I will establish a context for the FLAT Gallery in terms of its structure and its programmes through comparisons with other examples of 'alternative spaces' and 'alternative practices'.

One might very well ask, "What is significant about the FLAT Gallery and why is it important to document so laboriously such a 'brief' flurry of activity?" Some of the material in this paper might offer students, recent graduates and emerging artists useful practical information on the various possibilities for working and exhibiting once one has left the 'comforts' of faculty guidance, peer support, studio facilities and venues for showing work that the institutional environment provides. Perhaps more importantly, this 'story' might inspire those who read it with an affirmation that there rests in the artist the responsibility to actively build a place where his/her development as a creative individual can flourish; that one must not wait for 'permission' or for 'someone' to offer validation of one's work; that it is indeed possible here in Durban to "**do something!**"

Additionally, I must also confess that my motivations for producing this paper might arise out of some personal need to look back at the FLAT experience and to revisit that project with the distance of time (and I hoped some degree of objectivity). I have asked myself many times, "Why was the experience so important to my growth as an artist at that time? Why was it so important to those of us who were so deeply involved - Moe, Horsburgh, Barry, Gainer, and all the others who passed through and participated?" The experience pushed something in our artists' lives that we had not encountered before. It opened us up to a particular kind of dialogue and experimentation that was invaluable in the later development of our work. It gave us the courage to explore our art and to live in a manner that was true to the work and not to the market or the conventional notions around us of what 'art' should be. It allowed us to develop something (albeit sometimes crude) which was independent of the institution and so gave us confidence in our abilities to take charge of our creative lives. In spite of the (sometimes valid) accusations that the FLAT operation was "unprofessional" or its programmes "incomprehensible", I believe that it was a valuable part of our education as young artists and that we were operating within the tradition of other important historical precedents. One might ask, "Was the FLAT Gallery just a series of unprofessional displays and immature pranks or was it 'serious play'?" In revisiting that brief explosion of creative energy I hope to address that question.

THOMAS BARRY, 'As hy weer kom', A 'détourned' safety label made sometime at the FLAT, 199?.