

THE POST-FLAT CONTINUATION

A Temporary Conclusion

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The burning of the FLAT marked the end of the ‘informal’ space as it had grown over the 16 months that it ran. Shifts had occurred over the course of its development and changes in our lives directly impacted on the character of the FLAT programme. Towards the end we had moved out of the space and had begun to operate in a manner that increasingly resembled a more conventional gallery. This included more advance programming and less direct and spontaneous interplay between living and exhibiting. Though we remained committed to our original mission to “provide a free and open space for all” the nature of the exhibitions in the last months were more conventional in format. Indeed ironically the FLAT began to contract just as it had begun to expand.

Just as there is no single clear reason for the FLAT’s beginning, so too the reasons behind its end are multi-layered. Life is always in flux and ‘alternatives’ by their nature reflect the changing circumstances of their participants. The constant burden of living in the chaos of a ‘public space’ was impossible to sustain, and the opening of South Africa to the world led many of the participants to seek new experiences outside of Durban.

It is significant to consider, however, that the FLAT operated during the transition into democracy in South Africa. Indeed, the symmetry is remarkable, with the gallery opening eight months before the elections and closing eight months after. The importance of this historical junction was discussed in conversation between Technikon Lecturer Lola Frost, Kendall Buster, a lecturer from the United States, and myself. Frost’s insight that the FLAT “articulated a utopian moment” spoke to the transitoriness of such ventures and the significance of the times in which it operated:

Frost: I keep on saying to students now, for God’s sake get out there, go do it in the mall. And they look at me in amazement. I don’t see the sense of adventure now. I think what I am saying is that the FLAT Gallery existed historically between two periods – at the end of apartheid, and at the beginning of a new era. It actually existed in that gap. **The FLAT Gallery was an articulation of a utopian moment.** The very fact that you and Ledelle, who ran it, are now here in Washington also says something. Your interest isn’t in the new South Africa. Your leaving signaled the end of

this hole that corresponds with this gap time. I don't know what Thomas would have to say about that.

Buster: The FLAT though, and this is my reading of it, started to collapse on itself. And it is parallel or is not so unlike what happened to alternative spaces in the United States. You would have an alternative space that would start lean and mean, very direct; and then over the years, the word gets out... It is almost like something becomes a victim of its own success. What happened with the FLAT, Siemon saying that towards the end, they started scheduling ahead of time. The word got out and so more and more people wanted to have shows. And of course they had an open door policy. And towards the end, the whole thing started to lose some of that spirit. They moved, they were no longer living there, and so it was more like a proper gallery. So there wasn't that same blurring of art and life. It changed... it was over.

Frost: I would say it slightly differently. When it started, it was filled with excitement at a) the running of the gallery, b) the implicit recognition of this moment, with all of its potential freedoms. The FLAT Gallery was an articulation of a utopian moment. The problem is that it started like that, and then other people started to see this and wanted to get in on the act, so to speak. But the minute other people get in on the act, it is no longer an 'installation' with utopian possibilities. It gets to be a 'business' that needs to be organized. It needs to be run and managed. And these artists were not about that. I remember thinking: "Oh, this was too much of a bother." I remember speaking to you and you said that you were bogged down in bureaucracy and forward planning. And I thought: "Oh well this won't last." And it didn't last much longer than that.

Allen: I always thought it was an interesting paradox that as soon as we started reaching our aims and goals, we lost interest.

Frost: But you see, you lost interest because I think there was a fundamental contradiction, and understandably so. A contradiction between an operation that was basically intimate and very located in a particular community; and its sense of responsibility towards the larger community. This responsibility was at odds with the intimacy and the locatedness that was actually driving it. And so you got strung out on policies which you felt you had to implement, in the name of avant-gardism – which were inclusive, non-racial and non-commodifiable. Those are hefty projects. I remember thinking: "Oh this is highly improbable." At the same time though I would have censored that opinion. I would have said to myself that I am not allowed to think of these things in the new South Africa. It is a new moment, everything is possible. The fact that it didn't continue shows how over-ambitious it was.

Allen: I like what you are saying about connecting the FLAT to those ambitious times. The new South Africa, the new constitution - anything is possible.

Frost: Well at the time everybody was working out the new constitution. It was only settled by 1994 and the FLAT gallery started in 1993. That's the FLAT's architectural frame.

Allen: The elections happened at the height of the FLAT gallery's success. It was right in the middle. The gallery opened eight months before the elections, and closed eight months after them.

Frost: I think that is very significant.¹

Though the FLAT as it had been was over, with time, this ending began to seem more like a transition or transformation for me. Not long after the burning and closing of the space, the FLAT was asked to participate in an exhibition documenting the heritage of art and cultural organizations in Durban. I continued FLAT activities without a space through the publication of a newsletter, the creation of an article for the newspaper under a pseudonym, and through the continued reworking of FLAT tapes in my own audio art projects. Moe, who was studying abroad at Virginia Commonwealth University, launched an exhibition in an empty warehouse space outside the 'official' gallery space reserved for graduate students. Later, under the name of *FLAT International* we presented installations in an unused store-front in Richmond, and she mounted a number of 'open studio' exhibitions in Baltimore and Washington, DC. Barry moved to Johannesburg to start working as a video-editor and became involved with the experimental music group, the Mud Ensemble and Horsburgh, after Cape Town, moved to London.



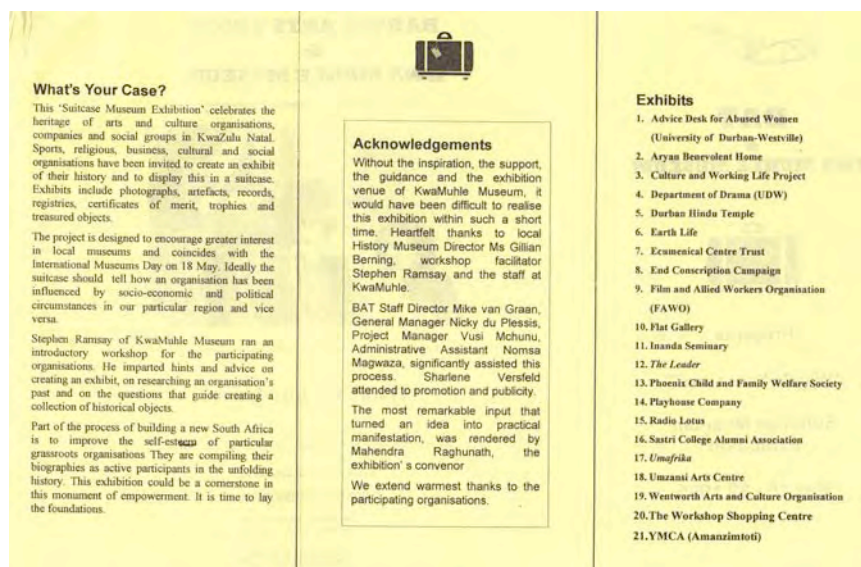
The FLAT contribution to the *What's Your Case* exhibition – a box of burnt paper, 1995

¹ Frost, Allen; Interview 12, Richmond, Feb 18, 1999

WHAT'S YOUR CASE, Suitcase Exhibition Kwa Muhle Museum May 16, 1995

To celebrate International Museums Day (18 May), this exhibition was organized by the Bartel Arts Trust, at the Kwa Muhle Museum. Documenting the heritage of arts and culture organizations, companies and social groups in Kwa-Zulu Natal. A glance at the list of participants gives one a sense of the range of 'cultural' and 'political' voices that were involved, and highlighted the inseparable relationship between art and politics in South Africa. Though this was an 'art' show, with each organization being asked to submit a 'suitcase' for exhibition, most were not arts organizations. The list of 21 exhibitors included a broad range of venues that ranged from ecological organizations such as *Earth Life*; to the cultural working group - *Culture and Working Life Project*; *Umzansi Arts Center*; the anti-apartheid organization - *End Conscription Campaign*; *Umafrika*; as well as the *Durban Hindu Temple*.

The FLAT, regarded in this context as a 'historic' Durban organization, chose to present 'information' about its activities in a less straightforward manner than most of the exhibition participants. Each had been given a large trunk and invited to exhibit information about their respective organisations in the boxes, and everybody complied. We, however, chose to present a memorial to the FLAT's final burning, and in keeping with its subversive strategies filled our trunk with burnt newspaper. The charred illegible text was a symbol of information withheld and forgotten histories. It was indeed a "mysterious object", as one person commented, among the other presentations.



FLAT

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7 April, 1995

The NSA Committee

Re: Distribution of monthly art forum

FLAT is a self-funded, non-profit organisation promoting art and art criticism in South Africa.

The degree of art criticism and discussion in KwaZulu Natal is seriously lacking. Thus it is FLAT's intent to create a monthly forum consisting of interviews with various artists, critiques of various exhibitions as well as discussion of contemporary issues in the arts. The forum's purpose is to highlight these issues as well as document the information which might otherwise be lost.

Although the forum is completely self funded, it is seeking assistance in the form of distribution. As the NSA mailing system is well circulated in KwaZulu Natal we ask if it is possible to insert this forum in the NSA's invitational mail.

FLAT, although being distributed through the NSA's mailing system, would like to remain independent of all organisations and institutions e.g. BAT; NSA; UDW; Tech. Natal.

FLAT looks forward to your response.

Yours faithfully



Siemon Allen
FLAT

A request was sent to the NSA, asking if they would assist us by including the FLAT Newsletter in their mailing. They however declined the request, 1995.

FLAT NEWLETTER

FLAT Issue 1

GREG STREAK

April 1995

Without a physical space from which to operate, FLAT activities required an alternative medium. Born out of the necessity to find a cheap option that would allow for continued dialogue - an art newsletter: *FLAT* - was created. With the DTP skills of Caryn Iseman, a Technikon Fine Art graduate, a monthly publication of 1000 copies was produced. This was distributed to a large audience without the requirement of any specific space. A request for distribution through their mailing was sent to the NSA, but this was declined.

In May of 1995 I approached Greg Streak, who had just returned from the United States, to do an interview for the newsletter. It was significant that Streak had neither shown nor been involved with the FLAT, and so in some sense represented a fresh perspective. The aim of the Newsletter was to look critically at cultural production in Durban, through the medium of the interview. As there was no other art press like this in Durban, it seemed most appropriate. It is significant that Streak spoke critically about the various arts organizations in Durban.

FLAT Issue 2

ESSEX ROAD GALLERY

July 1995

The Essex Road artists, as mentioned earlier were in constant communication with the FLAT gallery and an interview with a group of its key participants followed the Streak issue. This document was published with text in both English and Zulu translated by Simon Manana. This interview was published to accompany an exhibition of Essex Road artists' work at the NSA.

At this time, Andries Botha assisted us in putting forward an application for funding for the newsletter from BAT. Vusi Mchunu, then director of BAT, saw this issue of the newsletter and he was extremely supportive. We were informed that we would receive a R1000 grant to continue the document, but due to unrelated circumstances, never drew this money.

FLAT Issue 3
MELISSA MARRINS
August 1995

In April of 1995, Melissa Marrins had organized two off-site installations at Chandon House, in what was an old operating theater in Mount Edgecombe. My interest in interviewing Marrins lay in what I perceived as a growth at that time in the use of non-traditional venues for site-specific installations in the greater Durban area.

The interview is presented here in its entirety for the first time; it was never published and distributed, as I had left the country before I could release it. At this time, I was given the opportunity for an artist residency in the United States. I chose to leave Durban and go to the Washington, DC area to expand my research into alternative spaces in the States, and to continue with my own artistic projects.



After the publication of the second issue of *FLAT*, the Bartel Arts Trust gave a R 1000 grant towards the production costs of the newsletter. However due to unrelated circumstances, the money was never used, 1995.

SA Greg Streak, you graduated from Technikon Natal with a Higher Diploma in 1992, what have you been doing since then?

GS Since I left Tech my primary concern has been to involve myself as much as possible with making art. I felt that when I was at Tech there was this very strong fear, and maybe this sounds a bit dramatic, that when you leave Tech you stop making art. This was compounded for me by the past track record of students who had left and who had subsequently disappeared into non-art related fields. I feel that this is due to a lack of infrastructure outside of the institution. So when I left, it became almost a self conscious mission to involve myself continually in creativity. Fortunately I was approached by Andries Botha to work as his assistant. Towards late 1993 I managed to have a three person show in Durban and a two person show in Johannesburg. During the early part of 1994 I spent four months overseas spread between the United States and Amsterdam where I worked extensively in the capacity of assistant to Boet. On my return I worked for three months as a technical assistant for the Durban Art Gallery. I am currently lecturing part time in sculpture at Technikon Natal, as well as completing my Masters Diploma. Although my apprenticeship with Boet is now over I now work along side him in his studio on campus.

SA Can you expand on your experiences overseas?

GS Quite extensively actually...When I returned I was initially extremely aggressive and angry, but in hindsight the experience was invaluable. To experience American culture first hand which had always existed for me as a stereotype has instilled in me an enormous sense of self worth. It is virtually impossible to engage the 'States' without some preconceptions, since it is

FLAT IS A MONTHLY FORUM WHICH HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED TO LOOK CRITICALLY AT CONTEMPORARY ISSUES WITHIN THE ARTS IN SOUTH AFRICA.

IN THIS FIRST ISSUE SIEMON ALLEN INTERVIEWS GREG STREAK, ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING A YOUNG ARTIST IN THE CONTEXT OF DURBAN.

BOTH SIEMON ALLEN AND GREG STREAK ARE COMPLETING THEIR MASTERS DEGREES IN FINE ART, AS WELL AS LECTURING PART TIME AT THE TECHNIKON NATAL.



always forced down our throats at any and every opportunity. I went feeling like the under dog from Africa and returned bursting with rage at having done so. The work which I experienced at institutions at the highest level, and here I'm talking about masters work, was incredibly mediocre and would certainly not get through second year at Technikon Natal. Even the main stream work in New York, which is international art at its prime was disappointing.

We in South Africa produce an exceptionally competitive edge with regards to anything that I

saw. We need to assume a far more emphatic stance and not start trembling at the knees and bowing down to anyone who emerges from overseas.

SA How do you feel about being a South Africa Artist at this point in time?

GS I think for a South African Artist it is an incredibly exciting time for two reasons: Firstly, due to our recent political transformations and secondly our inclusion back into the international art arena. In my opinion America and Europe are creatively saturated and are now looking to Africa, because of our isolation from them, to engage them with fresh ideas. We tend to be so absorbed by Eurocentric and American trends that we end up trying to emulate everything we see in 'Art News' or 'Art in America' because we think we are not good enough. The problem is however if South African artists insist on producing the next trend from wherever, it is always going to be out of context and depersonalised. When foreigners arrive to experience a 'breath of fresh air' they are consumed by the same garbage they have just escaped from at home and because the works are carbon-copies they will invariably never have the same clarity. In a nut-shell I really believe we need to tackle our own complexities in as a responsible and dignified manner as possible, and then place them within an international context - my bet is that they hold their own with ease...

SA Lets get back to local issues. How do you feel about the institution in which you were trained (Technikon Natal)?

GS Every institution has it's problems as inevitably they are fraught with bureaucracy. Disregarding that the Technikon Natal Fine Art Department has proved its worth in relation to other institutions and thus has a distinctive reputation especially in sculpture. However, I don't

think that post institutional realities are made clear enough nor are they emphasised enough. Within your study years there is an enormous infrastructure available to you. You become over-dependent on the facilities, the moral support, the collective energies, all of which I think are positive attributes but which can undermine your independence. Some further steps need to be introduced to soften the blow from Tech into the realities of the 'big-wide-world'...

SA Do you feel the infrastructure in Durban facilitates your art making?

GS Firstly, I don't think that there are enough infrastructures in Durban, if any. I have a space in which to work, I have the use of Technikon Sculpture Department facilities, but outside from that there is nothing in my opinion. Ideal exhibition spaces at the moment are restricted to the Technikon Gallery. Although I am aware that the Natal Society of Arts is anticipating new premises, the current set-up is not satisfactory. The commercial curio shop in front of the gallery impinges upon the clarity and ambiance of the exhibiting space. This particular gallery in my opinion is not discerning enough with regard to who exhibits there. It will never establish itself as a critical space which shows major artists unless it becomes more cut throat. Perhaps, on the other hand, it does not want this acclaim and is content with being a space for anyone. However this being one of only two spaces available in Durban, doesn't leave serious artists with much option. Perhaps if alternative spaces which ensured far more selective exhibiting were initiated it would enforce these with the monopoly to open their eyes and wake up.

SA How do you feel about making art in Durban?

GS This follows more or less from what I was talking

about. I don't want it to appear that I have an overall damning and pessimistic outlook on creativity in Durban. Despite it's problems, it does not have the overkill hype and continual melodrama of Johannesburg. There are sufficient tensions to ensure a conclusive environment for creativity. But again my regret is that if one wants a critical response or a degree of professional exposure one has to move the works into the appropriate spaces in Johannesburg. Johannesburg is also inundated with unprofessional space, but it does have the one up on everywhere else nationally, in that it



does provide some acknowledged galleries. Cape Town seems too laid back and Johannesburg pathetically absorbed in superficiality, image and hype and so Durban seems the best place to work as it is somewhere in-between.

SA What is your opinion of the new up-and-coming BAT centre which is opening in Durban in June.

GS Bartel Arts Trust in my opinion, has probably the most significant role to play in creativity for Durban. With its significant fund base it can estab-

lish poignant infrastructures which are at the same level as those in Johannesburg, providing it can step outside its' current politically correct agenda's and endorse merit rather than mediocrity. I really believe that Bartel Arts has an incredible potential and will steer Natal creativity into the forefront, providing within each of the disciplines (visual arts performing....) pivotal acknowledged individuals are nominated to the call of duty.

SA Could you now talk about your work and what it is about?

GS My works deal with contemporary issues of gender, identity, social responsibility etc... and their intricacies. However, the works are highly personalised in that I confront issues relative to my own agenda's and not because this or that is the current trend or hype which I 'have to deal with' in order to be 'relevant'. I dictate what it is that I will pursue, not the art market, not anyone else. The works about confronting personal interests in order that I can make the next step forward in every sense of the term. If you pander to what the external art market dictates, you'll end up schizophrenic. That world is so fickle and contradicts itself every few months merely so that it may maintain its self-developed image and hype. The platform given to the artist is a unique one. We can virtually say what we want, how we want and get away with it. It is an incredibly responsible position, which is unfortunately abused by those with personal agendas and by ego-maniacs. Artists in a sense have historically been socio-political journalists, commenting on the specifics of each epoch manifest and made concrete by tangible objects. Its not merely about reflecting a given point in time but for me also attempting to influence what happens in the future. Much contemporary art is transient, overliteral, almost nihilistic in manner under the pretext of stating things as

they are. Agreed, society is hanging by a few tenuous threads, absorbed by technology and its depersonalised nature, but there are other ways of making the same comments, constructively - by attempting to invert this rapid degeneration. Because Cezanne painted apples during the Franco-Prussian war does not mean he was oblivious to the social crises of his time. His concern was with re-establishing values and value-systems. If you are on a ship that is sinking do you stand there and go down with it to your nemesis? I am one of those individuals with a bucket attempting to drain the water. It seems futile only when everyone else is standing on the otherside of the ship accelerating your demise, in other words its about collective energies made up of individual efforts.

Although my works engage technological advancements, it remains paramount for me to celebrate process as an acknowledgement of my own humanity. This human endeavour, this hands on approach is my final non-negotiable frontier against the dematerialistic debate in art. My works are a strong endorsement of craftsmanship. Labour intensity in my opinion is imperative within our society which is philosophically ill-equipped to deal with our rapid technological advancements. I'm not sure whether this has the clarity with which I would like to articulate my work. It is difficult to verbalise that which is multi-layered, partly intuitive and spontaneous. It may all seem romantic but then so be it.

SA Is there anything wrong with romanticism?

GS No, but it has developed negative overtones because it is seen as overly idealistic.

SA Your work in the past has been criticised for being too similar to that of Andries Botha. What are your feelings about this?

GS My response is that when I arrived at Tech a few years ago I had never made sculpture before. Boet was that person who taught me the fundamentals of sculpture according to specific techniques he had learned and developed. It seems perfectly logical that there will be some connections. My aim has always been to acquire as an extensive and diverse language as possible. If one is going to be childishly self-conscious about being influenced by some-one you only cut off your nose to spite your face. In my opinion there are no short cuts in life. If by some



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chance you have the opportunity to benefit from some one else's experiences, seize it. This will allow you in some way to cut one or two corners. Otherwise you spend your life in a futile attempt, trying to be individual when you don't have the language to be so. I have been taught to find materials which approximate that with which I am talking about. That is the relationship between Boet's work and mine. There is a utilization of material appropriateness with concept. The fact that I am intense and obsessed with detail and subtleties is a part of my character. You cannot be some-

thing you are not. You can't learn obsession or intensity. You either are or you are not. By people merely disregarding the work as the same as Andries Botha's, in one rash statement they undermine me as an individual, my personal complexities, the sacrifices and hard work. My response is look at the work and what it is confronting you with and stop trying to ignore its claims by alining it with something else. There is a distinct difference between influence and plagiarism. What intrigues me is how acceptable it is for artists to be influenced by, or more directly to rip off works from overseas, but it isn't 'kosher' to be influenced by an individual that exists within your own context. Very strange indeed.

SA What are your opinions (in this day and age) on assistantship bearing in mind your experience in having worked with Andries Botha?

GS There are pros and cons. To be able to make sculpture everyday, even if it is someone else's, is far preferential to having to wait etc... I have learnt an enormous amount. Not merely the subtleties of making sculpture, nor embellishing my own technical skills, but for me the most important thing is having learned an incredible work ethic. It is all very well being talented, but if you don't know how to focus it, it is useless. I am not confused about what it is that I believe in or what it is I want to do. To have this sense of direction and with such clarity is something for which I will always be grateful. Obviously life has traps laid for me, I am not immune to its nuances but I am confident that I have the foil to them.

Obviously working as intensely as I did with Boet takes its toll. As a creative person, working on someone else's pieces while your mind wanders endlessly with your own ideas, is an incredible compromise to juggle. After two years full time I needed

some continuity and to focus on my own vision. However for me it was an essential compromise. For my energy I have been more than compensated in that I can now work articulately and with a fair degree of resolve. Assistanship in the arts, especially in sculpture is as old as the discipline itself. There must be something to it.

SA Has selling your work to a national collection (The Durban Art Gallery) and winning the Face to Face art competition (1994) affected you in any way?

GS I don't think either have affected me significantly. I understand that both are subjective decisions. Had there been a different set of judges at the Face to Face, I may not have won. I have worked hard and merely see the award as an acknowledgement of my commitment. A select group of people are saying that they feel that what you are doing is qualitative.

The work in the Durban Art Gallery collection at first was an honour. However, having now understood how works are selected, who initially selects them, and who makes the final decision, the honour now seems a little lack-luster. There are some beautiful works in the collection but there are also terrible works. I appreciate the acknowledgement but also don't think that it is always necessarily a reflection of quality. I think that both have given me a boost financially and psychologically.

SA Finally how do you feel about being a young artist and what are your plans for the future?

GS I have countless frustrations and laments about being young. I know that I have

a lot to learn but I also know through my selective interaction with specific people understand owe and enormous amount to. The problem is you are not taken seriously when you are young. There is this almost sadist, calvinistic mind-set in our society and especially in the visual arts in South Africa, where no-one wants to give you the credit that you deserve until you have a proven track record. The theory makes sense, yet it seems too extreme. Perhaps when you are 40 you will end up being endorsed. This is not good enough. There are certainly many talented young artists that just disappear because of a

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sense of alienation, as a result of a lack of support. We all know how different it is in South Africa to be a full time artist. This is due to our lack of infrastructures, lack of exposure, acknowledgement and the fact that our profession is regarded as a hobby for extremists and eccentrics. Our profession is fraught with wannabe's, attention seekers and charlatans. My point is that it is too easy

just to call oneself an artist, for example a lawyer who paints every Sunday, after some time exhibits these paintings at the NSA, and now feels that he too is an artist. My definition of an artist is someone who spends most of their time making art and when they aren't is a means to facilitate it. I don't want to get caught up in that 'artist elitism' bullshit. Creativity is an escape for many people and so it should be. It allows a far more irrational, intuitiveness which is an essential escape from the tedium of every day life. However, to claim to be an artist as a result is incredibly undermining to those individuals who exercise enormous discipline, sacrifices and commitment in making art. If I administer to a person with a headache etc... Do I now qualify as a doctor... This may sound simplistic and extreme but so it should be otherwise the parallels are not clear enough. I see myself as an artist at the same level as society acknowledges doctors, lawyers, journalists etc... I would never assume doctor status for simple treatment merely because I can well understand and have respect for the intricacies, delicacies and subtleties of that profession. Likewise, I expect the same. It appears that being an artist engages you with a unique set of complexities and being young compounds it.

In the near future I expect to travel overseas to interview a Dutch artist, Marlene Dumas; as part of my Masters Dissertation. I am currently doing commission work for the Natal Maritime museum and I am also involved with a company which produces large inflatables for advertising purposes. This is all an attempt to create a financial base from which I can make my own work.

FLAT

If anyone has any ideas or contributions for FLAT, please write to one of the following addresses

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IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, DURBAN HAS SEEN A RISE IN THE PHENOMENON OF THE INFORMAL GALLERY. ARTISTS HAVE CONVERTED THEIR LOUNGES, PATIOS AND IN SOME CASES THEIR ENTIRE RESIDENCES INTO EXHIBITING SPACE FOR ART.

THIS SECOND ISSUE OF FLAT FEATURES A DISCUSSION AMONGST VARIOUS ARTISTS RECORDED AT ONE SUCH VENUE 38 ESSEX RD GALLERY.

THIS ISSUE HAS BEEN COMPILED AS A COMPLEMENT TO THE EXHIBITION, AT THE NSA GALLERY, OF ARTISTS INVOLVED WITH THE ESSEX RD. PROJECT.

THE ARTISTS INCLUDED IN THE DISCUSSION ARE KENDAL BUSTER, A VISITING ARTIST FROM THE USA; THAMI JALI; JOSEPH MANANA, BOTH INITIATORS OF ESSEX RD GALLERY; ISAAC SIKHAKHANE, A SECOND YEAR GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENT AT ML SULTAN TECHNIKON; SIEMON ALLEN, AND THOMAS BARRY, BOTH CO-ORDINATORS OF THE FLAT GALLERY (ANOTHER INFORMAL SPACE).

EMINYAKENI EMIBALWA EYABLULE, IHEKU LIBONISE UKU KHULA NGOMSUKISO ONGAMILEKAHLE. AMA-ARTISTS AZISHINTSHA IZILMI ZAWO, NGOKWEHLUKANA KWAZO, NENBAWO ABAHLALA KUYO BAYENZA UMBUKISO YEMISEBENZI YEZANDLA.

LENDAYO YAPHINDE YAMISELWA UKUHLANGANISA IZINGXOXO EZAHLUKENE ZAMA-ARTIST, YABA YI: 38 ESSEX RD GALLERY. LOKHU KWAMISWA KAHLE NJENGOMBUKISO; OSE NSA GALLERY, YAMA-ARTIST AKHONA KU-ESSEX RD.

AMA-ARTISTS AYEXILONA ENGXOXWENI UKENDAL BUSTER, NE-ARTIST YASE USA; THAMI JALI; JOSEPH MANANA, NABANYE ABABUNGULI BASE-ESSEX RD GALLERY; U-ISSAC SIKHAKHANE; OWENZA UNYAKA WESIBILI E-ML SULTAN TECHNIKON; SIEMON ALLEN NO THOMAS BARRY ABASUNGULI BASE FLAT GALLERY.

KB

Could you tell me how 38 Essex Rd. Gallery got started?

TJ

It started in about July of 1994 when I come back to Durban from Johannesburg and got a room in Essex Rd. commune. I suggested to the artists here that we use this central common space (pointing to the lounge) for something as it was not being used.

TB

For me 38 Essex Rd. represents the voice of a group of artists who have established a space in which they can view and show art in a gallery context in short, people who have dealt with a crisis because having to produce and present work in a confined (living) space speaks to me of crisis, ultimately there aren't adequate channels for the artists in question to have their work promoted and appreciated, I say innovative because I think for a group of (black) artists to create a dynamic art space in white suburbia is innovative to say the least.

KB

Who were the original artists living with you at the time?

TJ

Joseph Manana, Isaac Sikhakhane, Simon Manana and Ilse Mikula... We were concerned about the fact that there wasn't really any communication between the artist and the public especially within the black middle class. Those are the people we wanted to pull into this set up



KB

Ungangitshela ukuthi i-38 Essex Rd. Gallery Jagala kanjani.

TJ

Yagala. Ngabo july ka -1994 lapho ngifika eThekwini ngivela eGoli nganikezwa ikamelo lokuhlala. E-38 Essex Rd. commune - ngabeka umbono wokuthi lenbawo isethsenziwe (ekhomba indlu yoku phumula) ngoba yayingasebenzi.

TB

Yayingasebenzi. Kimina i38 Essex road imele izwi lama artist asusa lenbawo ngengengabonisa futhi itshengise i-art embukisweni eyahlukene ngoku fishane abantu asekebamelana nalesisimo ngembelela yokusungula ngithi isimo esingesihle ngoba uku khiquiza nokubeka umsebenzi embaweni yokuhlala kusho isimo esibucayi ; ekuguneni yayi ngekho inugulu efanele yama artist ukuthi konje imisebenzi yawo yayinga nikezwa kanjani amazinga ayo ngikhuluma ngoku sungula ngoba ngicabanga ngedlana labamnyama abangama -artist ukwakha indawo endaweni yabamhlophe.

KB

Obani ababengama - artist ayehlala nawe ngalesikhathi ?

TJ

Kwaku - uJoseph Manana, Isaac Sikhakhane, Simon Manana, kanye no Ilse Mikula... Sasimelwe iouniso lokuthi kwakungekho ukuxhumama phakathi kwama - artist kanti futhi nomphakathi osemazingeni athle. Yibo abantu ababefuneka ukuba babonselwe kulento ngoba

because black people don't really go to galleries. There isn't that culture.

SA Why?

TJ First of all I think the level of art education at school is bad, and secondly most of them are poor. Instead of buying a painting they would buy something else. People just don't have money for art. So we decided to start a gallery that was non-commercial because our aim was to get people to come here and see what we do. The main objective was to educate people rather than sell work.

JM Black people tend to think that artists make art for fun - just something to keep themselves busy. So our idea was to show them what the necessity of art is.

KB To that end what kind of things did you do when you first started living here?

TJ We organised an exhibition! (laughter) The artists exhibiting were myself, Joseph Manana, Terry-Anne Stevenson, Ilse Mikula and Trueman Myaka. We organised some live music because we thought people would be attracted by this.

SA Yes, I found the nicest thing about coming to exhibitions here was that you came to look at art but the environment wasn't 'stiff'. Everyone was relaxed, there was music and people jammed...and there was alcohol...(laughter).

TJ I think that that atmosphere came about because our real objective was to socialise (laughter).

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

SA Why?

TJ Because people believe in getting employed. People think you are working only if you are employed somewhere with a constat salary each month. And again there are no galleries in the townships. many people have not seen a gallery nor even our own work.... Most of my work

abantu abamnyama abanyama abayi ema Gallery.

SA Yini indaba?

TJ Okokudlala ngicabanga izinga lemfundo esikoleni alilihle futhi okwesibili iningi liyahlu pheka okunokuba bathenge opende bengathe nga oku nye abantu abanayo imali ye art. Ngakhoke savumelana ngokuba sivule indlu yemibukiso inhloso kwaku ngekhona ukubane sakhe imali kodwa kwaku ukufundisa abantu ukuno kuba dayisela .

JM Abantu abantu abamnyama bacabanga ukuthi i -art yenzelwa ukuthi umuntu azi uthele isi zungu - ukuthi kube khona akakwenzayo. Imbono yethu kwaku ukubatshengisa okubalule kile kwi-Art ukuthi yini isidingo se-Art.

KB Kulokho kwaba iziphi izinto enazenza ngesikhathi niqala ukuhlalapha.

TJ Sahlela umbukiso! (Ehleka). Embukiweni kwakuimina (Thami), Joseph Manana, Terry-Anne Stevenson, Ilse Mikula and Trueman Myaka. Sahlela umculo ngo kucabanga ukuthi abantu bazobeka ilokho.

SA Ya; ngthola into emnandi ngokuza. Lapha embukisweni ikhona ukuthi nanifuna abantu beze embukiseni we art, kodwa umphakathi wawulukhuni kulokho. Wonke umuntu waye khululekile engathi umcimbi kuneziphuzo ezishsayo (uyahleka).

TJ Ngicabanga ukuthi lokho kwavela nogkuthi inhloso yethu kwaku ukubanbawonye ngezimphilo (uyahleka). Ngesikhathi abantu befika lapha sasifuna bazizwe besekhaya-asithandanga. Umuveza imibono yethu kubona. Sasifuna imbelela lapho abantu bezokhuluma nge art nezinto. Ezinye ngokujulekile ukuze bazi ukuthi ama artist . Abantu abajwayelekile, ngoba emalokishini abantu bacababga ukhuthi. Ama artist abasemoyeni (uyahleka).

SA Ngani?

TJ Ngoba abantu bakholelwa ekugashweni abantu bacabanga ukuthi osebenzayo oqashiwe nbawotihle. Ethola inani elithile leholo genyanga. Futhi azikho izindawo zemi bukiso emalokishini. Abantu abaningi abakaze bayibone



has been shown here in the city.
To them artists are some kind of mystery.

SA Have similar informal set ups like Essex Rd. existed in the townships?

TJ Ja...Ja (kettle boils)

In fact in 1989 in Claremont Township, I used to do something very similar with my kiln firings. Because I wasn't using an electric kiln, I would construct my own kilns; Invite people over in the evening and actually demonstrate the whole process like setting up the kiln, packing it, lighting it and then show them other uses of the kiln. For instance we would just have a braai on it (laughter). Educate people while they are relaxed! (Laughter.) I would then display the work on the verandah and people were not intimidated. Formal Galleries do intimidate people.

KB In the townships, if a young person is inclined to say draw or paint, is he or she encouraged to pursue this seriously?

IS It is not encouraged!

JM You find people who can see that you are talented. Sometimes, someone will ask you to do their portrait for maybe R10. But on a whole it is not taken seriously. It is not seen as a career option.

IS Like me for instance. I grew up with a talent for art in the township. But I wasn't encouraged. My parents didn't know what art was. When I finished std 10 though some people did say that I should contact an art institution or something. It was then that I decided to embark on this career but up until then it had not been in my mind!

KB So Essex Group is providing a support for you.

IS Ja. I remember visiting this place before I went to Tech. (ML Sultan).

TJ It has always been like that here.

JM Some years ago if one came to town for an exhibition from the township and you could not get transport back home then you knew that you could come here and stay overnight (laughter).

TJ That is the whole spirit of Essex Rd. Gallery.
The FLAT Gallery also played a role in a sense because when we went there we thought well

indawo yemibukiso noma nje imisebenzi yethu. Eminingi yenysebenzi yami yaziwa lapha edolobheni lasethewini. Kubona ama artist olonyehlobo lokubuka emswaneni.

SA Zukhona ezinye izindawo ezifana ne 38 Essex Rd emalokshini?

TJ Ya...ya... (ezisafufusa)

Empeleni ngo 1989E-Clermont Township. Ngangijwayele ukwenza izinto ezifana ne kiln firing. Ngoba ngangingasebenzisi i-Electric kiln, ngangizakhela eyami i-kiln; ngimema abantuntamba. Ngibathsengise imbelela okwenziwa ngayo i-kiln, ngiyitake, ngiokhele bese ngibathswengisa ezinye izindlela ikiln esebenza ngazo. Ngengokuthi sing -sa inyama kuyo (uyahleka) sifundise abantu ngesikhathi bezikhululekele (ehleka). Ngizowubeka -ke lomsebenzi phandle abantu babengahlulwa-lutho. Imibukiso esemazi ngeni aphambili iyabakhathaza abantu.

IS Ayikhuthazwa

JM Uyabathola abantu ababonayo ukuthi unesiphilwo. Nyesinye isikhathi omunye uzofuna umbwebe bese ukunikeza R10, kodwa kukho konke. ayithathwa njengoku baluleka kwayo, nanje ngomsebenzi ongawenza impilo yakho yonke.

IS Ngengamingakhula nginesiphilwo se-art kodwa angizange ngikhuthazwe umuntu. Abazali babengazi ukuthi iyini i-art. Ngesikhathi ngiqeba ibanga leshumi yize abantu babenga sho ukuthi ngiye esikoleni se-art. Yilaphomina engaphetha ngokuthatha lomsebenzi.

KB Iqembu laze Essex lakuxhasa kulokho?

IS Ya. Ngiyakhumbula ngivakashela kulendawo ngaphambikokuya E-Tech.

TJ Kwakubanjalo pahon ngasosonke isikhathi

JM Eminjakeni elule uma noma imuphi umuntu eza embukisweni edolobheni aqhamukaelokishini. Mangabe usuya emuva ungasenayo into yokuphindela emuva ubuzalapha uzocela indawo yokulala (ehleka).

TJ Iyo yonke imimoya yase Essex Rd Gallery. Le Flat Gallery beyibhala indawo masizalapha besicabanga ngokuthi nansi la ikhona. Isenziwe ngokuykho. Sifune ukuthola eminye imisebenzi efanayo neyase ndlini yemibukiso. Noma iFlat ihlala abantu abancane abehlukile kulowomaom-

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here it is: a very similar set up! Straight away we wanted to find some working relationship with the FLAT gallery. Although the FLAT was catering for a more or less different target group but the essence of our ideas overlapped.

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

SA Well the fact that we knew that each other existed is important. We would complement each other, go to each others exhibitions.

KB The idea of the artist wanting to take back a certain amount of responsibility for exhibitions seems do be positive. To say that "we are not going to wait for someone else to say that we are legitimate" - that for me is significant.
(Pause.)

TJ One thing I have always been concerned about in Durban is the general lack of interest or energy. People are really apathetic! In Johannesburg people get up in the mornings and want to do something (laughter). Here people are laid back and this worries me because this is my region. I grew up here. Over the last 15 years I have lived in Johannesburg for a number of long periods and I see things happening. And it is not just white artists exhibiting or organising something, but people of all racial groups. Here in Durban people tend to wait for other people to organise exhibitions for them.

KB Why is that?

TJ I think the reason is two-fold. Firstly there is a lack of facilities or good infrastructure and secondly geographically we are scattered here. Claremont township is west of Durban, KwaMashu north, Umlazi south, etc... To go from township to township you have to go through town whereas in Johannesburg Soweto is made up of a whole lot of townships so here we just don't have the culture of working as a group. That is also one of the reasons why 38 Essex Rd. is centrally placed in the city.

KB So in a sense what is happening here is a site for a gathering of people from different regions. Bringing those people together to exchange ideas and to create a network.

TJ Yes, in fact we don't see 38 Essex Rd. as a project that should only happen here. Some people have come forward and asked us to have exhibitions in their houses in different for example, as an event or something.

SA What are your feelings about exhibiting at the NSA, a non-commercial gallery in a commercial space?

bo kudwa owethu oba ngaphezi kwalokho.

KB Benza kanjani ukugunezela. Usho kanjani ukuthi abantu ebeninabo benine nhloso eyodwa?

SA Ngoba. Besazikhale ukuthi omunye uyaphila kubalulekile. Besibungaza omunye siye umangabo enombukiso.

KB Umbono wama -artist wokunfuna ukuthatha emuva okunje umuntu okumele akwenze enzela umbukiso bewu sekwa. Ukuthi asilindi noma ubani ukuthi sikhona ngokufanele - lokho kuwuphawukimi (athule).

TJ Okukodwa engihlala njalo ngikusho ngethu uku shoba kokusi misela nomfutho. Abantu abanawo lomuzwe. Egeli abantu bamengezi nyawo, bavuka ekuseni bafune ukwenza umsebenzi (ehleka). Lapha abantu baselele emuva lokhu okungikphatha kabi ngova indawo yangakithi. Ngakhula khona. Eminyakeni emgaphe zu-kuka 15. Ngihlale eGoli izikhithi eziningi. Ngibona izinto zenzeka. Kanti futhi akusiwona umsebenzi wabamhlophe kuphela obukiswayo kodwa owabantu bazozonke izinhlanga. Abantu balapha ethekweni balinda abanye okuba babahle lele umbukiso.

KB Yini kunjalo?

TJ Ngicabanga ukuthi isathu. Okoixuqala ukushoda kwezidingo noma kwezakhovo. Okuesibili ngokwesimo senhlalo sihlakazekile lapha i-Claremont isentishonalanga netheku, kwanlashu enyakatho, Umlazi eningizimu, kunjalo kunjalo... uku ya emalokishini ehlukeneyangamula. Kanti eGoli, iSoweto ihlenganise onke amalokishi. iSoweto ihlenganise onke amalokishi. Lapha asinayo inquboyoku sebenza njengeqembu. Yikho i-38 Essex Rd. Ibekwe maphakathi nedolobha.

KB Edininsweni okwenzekayo lapha indawo lapho kuhlangelanelwa khona kuahanyukwa ezindaweni ezahlukeneyo. Ukuhlenganiswa kwabo bonke lababantu kushintshamiswe umiqondo ukuze kwakhiwe into eyodwa.

TJ Yebo; equinisweni asiyiboni i-38 Essex Rd njenge ngqalabutho okufanele yenzeke lapha kuphela. Abanjy abantu sebeqhamuke futhi bahole thina ukuthi kube nombukiso ezinbaweni zabo ngokwehlukama.

SA Injani imizwa yakho ngemibukiso ese NSA: Indawo yemibukiso engadayiswa endaweni efanele engakubayisekwa kuyo?

TJ Empeleni ngijabule. Ama-artist amaningi asebenzi lapha awazange abenakho ukubonakala ebukisa endawe eneomlanado nje

TJ Well I am excited. A number of the artists who have worked here have had no significant exposure and for them to exhibit in a place with a long history like the NSA is exciting. The work can also reach a different audience. That is people who might not come to or know about Essex Rd. Gallery.

SA And it is also an opportunity to sell work.

TJ Yes, it gives us a sense of moving on. It is the culmination of all the things we have been doing here. And also after this exhibition we are going to get a lot of new artists interested in coming here and working with us.

SA How does someone like Philemon Sangweni who lives far away deal with Essex Rd?

TJ Well, he normally come here with a whole lot of work and leaves it here. If any work is sold we keep the money for him. I guess it's convenient for him to have a place like this. Some people like to use this place like that because they are unable to sell it in the rural areas. In fact this place is becoming a collection point for other exhibitions too...

SA How do people find out about exhibitions?

TJ Mainly through word of mouth. But we made invitations and posters too which we placed at places like the African Art Centre or the Durban Art Gallery etc...

Bartel Arts Trust (BAT) allowed us to use some of their facilities as well like the fax and photocopying machine.

SA What are your views on the Bartel Arts Centre.

TJ I think its going to be like another Market Theatre. We haven't really had anything like this here in Durban. I Johannesburg people are able to push forward because of a place like the Market Theatre. If there is one thing that worries me it is not being able to see Joseph for 12 months when I know he is around here in Durban. BAT will provide a forum for artists to meet. It will give us a sense that we are a community of artists. Without that you are working in a vacuum.

SA Your invitations always have the words "Cultural Eve" or "Bridging the cultural gap" on them. Can you talk about these?

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

ngo NSA kuya jabulisa. Umsebenzi endawo enomlando njenge NSA kuya jabulisa. Umsebenzi uzobukwa abantu abehlukeni abantu abangakaze beze noma bazi nge Essex Rd. Gallery.

SA Futhi kuyithuba lokudayisa umsebenzi.

TJ Yebo. Kusinikeza umuzwa wokuya phambili. Isebenzanjenge siphetho sakho konke ebesingakho lapha. Okunye emva kwalo mbukiso sizokhola amaArtist amaningi enogqozi lokuza lapha ezosebenzisaban nathi.

SA Wenza kanjani umuntu onjengo. Philmon Sangweni ohlala kube nalapha Essex Rd.

TJ Cha. Uvamise ukuze namsebenzi ominigi awusihye lapha uma kukhona okudayisiwe siyayigcina imali. Ngiya cabanga nzisa kanjalo lendawo ngoba abakwazi ukdayisa Emaphandleni. Eqinigweni lendawo isiphenduke njenge umbukiso futhi.

SA Abantu bazi kanjani ngengombukiso

TJ Siyamemezela ngokukhuluma ngabo ngomolomo kuphela. Futhi senza izimend nama pheshana liwe sibeke ezindaweni ezifana ne-African Art Centre noma Durban Art Gallery nyokunjalo.

IBartel Arts Trust (BAT) isivumela nkusebenzisa okunye okudinga umasikhipha isimemezelo njenge. Fax, iphoto copying machines.

SA Ithini imibono yenu nge Bartel Arts Centre

TJ Ngicaba nga izokuba njengenywe iMarket Theatre asikaze sibenakho okunena lapha eThekwini. EGoli abantu bayakwazi ukuthi baphumele ngoba kunendawo enjenge Market Theatre. Uma kunento engikhathazayo akungakho ngoba ngikwazi ukubona uJoseph izinyanga eziwu-12 umangazi ukuthi ukhona lapha ethekwini. IBAT izonikez indlela elula yokuhlangayela. Izonikeza umqondo wokuthi singama -Artist amdawonye. Nqaphandle kwalokhosiyozizwa sisebenza ngayedwana.

SA Isimeme senu njalo siba negama. "Cultural Eve" noma "Bridging the cultural gap" kusona ungakhuluma ngalokhu?

TJ Siwubone umbukiso wethu nje ntambama lenqubo mpilo. IArt, umculo kanje neziphuzo ezishisayo. Kudlala indawo ebalulekile. Abantu kumele bazi khombise ubona ngayo yonk indlela-ukucula, ukudansa uma befuna ukuhlala ubusuku bonke kuse kuse bengakwenza.

SA IFlat lalivihle kulo kho kokunye laliphenbu-ka indawo yezinhlanga (Ehleka).

SA

The FLAT was also pretty much like that sometimes it turned into complete madness (laughter).

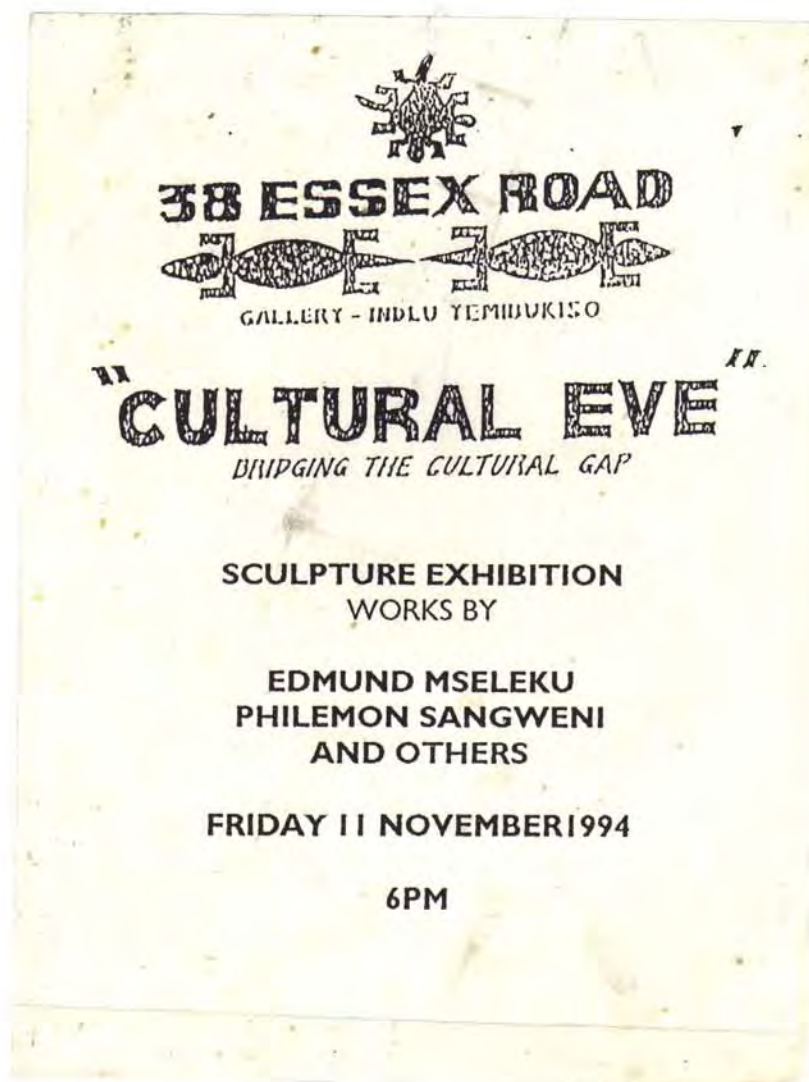
TJ

And its ok to have someting like that. Some of the friendships that started between the two galleries were very good I think. Thats what we need. Even if we were to interpret this as some sort of political statement.

TJ

Futhi kuhle konke ukuba nento enjalo anye abangani obunye ubungani baqala pakathi kwalendawo yembibukiso; kuhle ngiya phakathi kwalendawo yembukiso; kuhle ngiya cabanga ukuthi ilokho esikubingayo. Noma besingakuchaza lokhu njenge nye yemibhalao yepolitiki.

We apologise for errors in the Zulu translation.

**FLAT**

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AUGUST 1995 ISSUE 3

IN THE LAST YEAR, MELISSA MARRINS HAS EXHIBITED A NUMBER OF SITE-SPECIFIC INSTALLATIONS IN THE GREATER DURBAN AREA.

IN THIS THIRD ISSUE OF FLAT, SIEMON ALLEN DISCUSSES WITH MARRINS, THE NATURE OF HER WORK, AND THE RISE IN 'POPULARITY' OF THIS RELATIVELY 'NEW' MEDIUM.

MARRINS IS A HIGHER DIPLOMA CANDIDATE IN THE FINE ART DEPARTMENT OF TECHNIKON NATAL. ALLEN IS A FACUTY MEMBER OF THE SCULPTURE DEPARTMENT AT TECHNIKON NATAL.

SA

I am interested in your use of alternative space for two reasons:

1) The nature of your work requiring such spaces, and 2) The lack of infrastructure in Durban to accommodate such work.

MM

1) Part of the reason that I make use of alternative spaces is that I feel my work has entered into a far more public and visible realm. The type of work that I am making at the moment requires a kind of interaction and response from the viewer that would be inadequate within a gallery space. In other words, I would like the viewer to question my choice of venue and its surroundings (as in the Mt. Edgecombe installations.) The pilgrimage to the site is also part of the meaning in the work. On a personal level I am fired by the challenge to transform and give new meaning to a space. To bring my own meanings, metaphors and symbology to an otherwise 'mundane' space is an integral part of the art making to me - in other words the space is my canvass. 2) Unfortunately there is no infrastructure within Durban's galleries to facilitate installation work. The FLAT gallery was promising, and hopefully the new BAT centre will be far more open-minded in its approach to what constitutes 'art' and its



context. Durban seems to me to be the 'home-industries-shop' of galleries. They are mainly run by middle-aged women who know more about home perms than art. Of course no-one is going to allow young blood or new ideas to infiltrate their cozy little curio shops as this might prove to be to much of an upheaval. I would urge young artists to find alternative spaces to exhibit in, as this in itself, constitutes another facet to the actual work, which is often lacking in a gallery space.

SA

A number of young artists in Durban are working with the medium of installation. Could you talk about this and why you have chosen to work in this fashion?

MM

I do not believe that 'many' artists are actually working within the installation medium. In my opinion most of the installations I have seen here are generally of poor quality. I think it is a very disciplined medium and one in which I am certainly learning very quickly the difference between a 'good' or 'bad' installation. Internationally I think it has become the 'mainstream' form of art-making due to a fulfillment of a number of criteria: a) It engages all the senses of the participant. b) The viewer becomes a participant and has to engage with

the work. c) The use of space seems to fulfill the artist's desire for layered metaphors. I think one is able to create far more complexity in a space which allows for levels (both physical and symbolic).

d) I think the installation space (for myself, at any rate) is a physical manifestation of the soul/interior being.

SA

Why did you choose the Mt. Edgecombe and Face to Face spaces for those particular installations?

MM

I chose the Mt. Edgecombe space because it used to be an old hospital and the operating theatre and x-ray rooms were perfect for my metaphors - which are involved with the

surgical as well as the religious and the esoteric. The operating theatre in particular appealed to me because it was a transition area - people had actually died and lived there. So it was a room of souls, sad memories, entrapment and also liberation. I chose the *Ascetic's Dream Room* space at the Technikon (*Face to Face*) for two reasons: a) Practically I needed to be on campus for the *Face to Face* competition (And we all know what a fiasco that was. Although the sum of the parts did not exceed the size limit, the size of the piece was taken to be the size of the room and therefore not accepted.) b) Secondly, I liked the shape of the room (coffin shaped) and the fact that being on campus, it was accessible to a wide audience.

SA Do you still want to exhibit in galleries and if so, why?

MM Yes, I will when my work demands it. For instance the performance piece, *Extended Performance*, at the NSA gallery would not have worked in any other space besides a gallery. *A Woman's Space* and *Randoee* needed a theatre space. Until such time as I find a suitable space for an installation in a gallery, I will continue to use alternative spaces for that particular medium.

SA How do you feel about the attendance at your *Mt. Edgecombe* installation?

MM I was disappointed at the attendance as I had spent a lot of money on that installation. At first I was pretty resentful that people (and this includes so-called 'friends') did not make the effort to come. I could not believe the student attendance, which was literally zero. I feel however that it is those people's loss if they do not support art and artists and I am generally very tired of excuses and the apathy of our (Durban particularly) art community.

SA Do you think this apathy reflects on the nature of the interests of the community or the

nature of alternative spaces?

MM I think it reflects on a little of both. People in S.A. are not accustomed to the idea of alternative spaces, and instead of celebrating it they ignore it. If it is not in a gallery it is not 'real' art, you know. I think that the apathy levels in Durban are particularly high at the moment and I think the standard of the work being produced (both at the Technikon and generally) is very low. I don't know why this is, when there is a small contingent of Durban artists who consistently produce superior work.

SA How did you publicize the event?

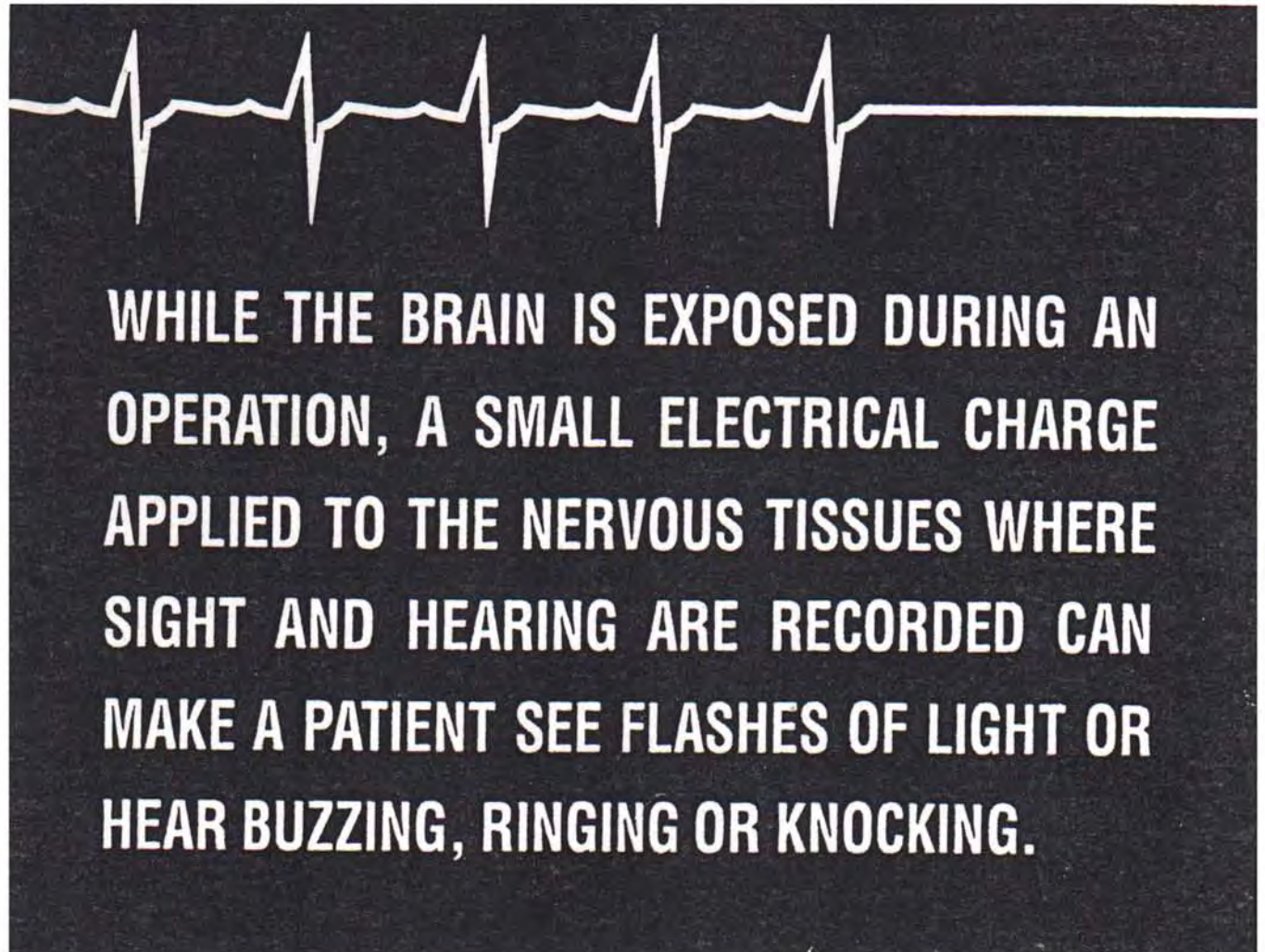
MM I sent out invitations via the Technikon's and the NSA gallery's mailing lists (roughly 2000). It was also in the newspaper, and posters were placed in the galleries, universities and art shops.

SA What are your views on the documentation of these pieces?

MM On one level I feel that documentation is important, although it does not portray the experience of the work. Documenting an installation is very different to photographing a painting for instance. I would like to see people making an effort to view this work and not rely on the documentation. Unless purchased an installation only exists for a prescribed time, and then it is over. If it is set up again it will be different. So the actual experience of viewing and participating is crucial.

SA Coming back to your *Mt. Edgecombe* piece could you discuss the 'journey' to the work and how this contributes to the 'nature' of the work?

MM Yes, *Faucal Instinctions!* The journey to the site is integral to the meaning of the



above: MELISSA MARRINS, invitation to the Faucal Instinctions Installations at Mount Edgecombe, 1995

left: MELISSA MARRINS, *Your Place or Mine?*, 1993, mixed-media, FLAT Gallery, Durban



work, for one is making a pilgrimage to a creation site. The actual journey gives one time to prepare oneself for what one is about to see and the journey back gives one time to absorb what one has just seen. The Mt. Edgecombe area has a particularly 'small town' feel to it - this is the kind of off beat, uncomfortable feeling I wanted the installation to have. I am working on a series of installations called the *Red Rooms Series* which are derived from the same awkwardness of the *Twin Peaks* series. The *Red Rooms* represent that queasy 'non-space' which can usually only exist in small towns.

SA

You spoke about intuition in making your work. Could you expand on that?

MIM

Well when I started working on *Faucal Instinctions*, I had no idea how I was going to progress. I worked from gut reactions with the space and made the components of the installation as I needed them. The way I work is to allow an idea to evolve and take its own direction. I suppose we call this 'intuition'. I think its about plugging into your own nebulous creative soul/persona where a wealth of ideas and imagery exist. I try to keep in contact with my gut feelings continuously and I have learnt to trust them.

SA

You have spoken about the theme of 'healing' in your work. What do you mean by this and how do you make it work for you?

MIM

This aspect of healing in my work has become a very challenging area for me. I am working on a way to visually represent the aspects of healing, creativity and artmaking, which I believe are completely interlinked. As well as the art work being a healing process for me, I would like to find a way that it can heal and restore the participants, much in the same way as three of my most admired artists: Marina Abramovic, Luvia Clark and Rebecca Horn. I see all my endeavours in art making up till now as informing and feeding my desire to heal / be healed through making art.

SA

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?

MIM

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 realisation that they can relate on some level to my imagery. This is obvious. If they did not recognise 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.

SA

On a more general note, what are your feelings towards the 1st Johannesburg Biennale and the work exhibited there?

MIM

I felt the Biennale was wonderful in some way and bad in others. It provided a relaxed environment to meet and interact with other artists, both locally and foreign. The actual art works are completely subjective. I felt that some works were brilliant and others tacky and unprofessional. One of the biggest issues for me was the exclusion / inclusion of certain artists. This is something that I hope will be addressed. On the whole I feel that it was a successful undertaking in this country and long over due.

SA

What are views on eurocentrism in the South African context?

MIM

If somebody could nutshell the meaning of 'eurocentrism' for me, I'd be extremely grateful. It has become an exceedingly dirty and un-PC term. Let's be honest, 'eurocentric' refers to any art that is not 'black' in this country. It is unfortunate that some people feel the need to label art in this way. I am sure that most practicing artists do not categorise their work in this way. They just make it according to their vision (and yes, I know that vision is constructed etc, etc...). Quite frankly I am bored with anal retentive theory.

FLAT

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The FLAT COMPACT DISKS & MEREDITH VIE 1995 - 1997

Once in the States I continued to research alternative spaces and make work, exhibiting a number of large-scale ‘architectural’ installations. I also began the preparation of two compilations of FLAT audio materials for inclusion in the *FLAT FILE* document. This effort resulted in two sets of limited edition compact disks. On one was a compilation of purely FLAT audio material, and on the other a document of my own audio work made at the FLAT, as well as some post-FLAT material that came out of the original FLAT tapes.

As had been the case with Nella Nomeis, my pseudonym used for the ‘invented’ band review some years back, I also created a persona, this time, “Meredith Vie”, to author a ‘review’ of this audio material. On returning to Durban, in 1996, I wrote this ‘review’ of these two ‘limited edition’ FLAT CDs, and submitted it to the *Mail and Guardian* (November 7). Interest from then editor, Charl Blignaut, led to a number of ‘calls’ to Meredith Vie, who of course did not exist. Jenah McCarthy, a young artist who had been researching alternative art spaces in Durban, agreed to my request to ‘be Meredith Vie’ and participated in the ‘intervention’ by returning Blignaut’s calls. Various communications ensued between them, and the document was edited a number of times with promises made for a publication date. However, for some unknown reason, perhaps ‘Meredith’s’ elusiveness, the article was never published.

26 November 1996

ATT : CHARL
WEEKLY MAIL AND GAURDIAN.

As requested, the edited version of the article Alternative...
alternative to what?

Please forward correspondence to : P.O. Box 47252, Greyville, Durban,
4023. I can also be reached by fax (031 - 221482) or by e-mail
(ntuntane@iafrica.com)

Yours sincerely


.....
MEREDITH VIE

Subject: gottit
Date: Thu, 28 Nov 1996 17:04:10 +0200 (SAT)
From: arts@mg.co.za (Mail & Guardian Arts)
To: ntuntane@iafrica.com

Hi Meredith

Found the story, thanks
Charl

The Lovely Charlene

Correspondence between Charl Blignaut of the *Mail & Guardian* and Meredith Vie, 1996

“ALTERNATIVE! Alternative to what...?”
By MEREDITH VIE

The now defunct FLAT Gallery, Durban's experiment in alternative 'living' and 'visual display' celebrates its third year of surreptitious activity with the release of two eponymous CDs. Initiated in 1993 by the then occupants; Ledelle Moe, Thomas Dry Barry and Siemon Allen: the FLAT operated out of a second story apartment and cultivated an inner-city context for Durban's avant-garde. "We needed a site for inter-disciplinary activity to combat Durban's overwhelming apathy in the arts," says Moe (now teaching at the Maryland Institute for Fine Arts in Baltimore, USA.) This tough militaristic description is sharply contrasted by the more elusive Barry who says: "We actually just wanted anything to happen."

Defying definition, the FLAT's 'everything-including-the-kitchen-sink' attitude towards performance and installation has been influential, if nothing else, on the programming of more established art venues such as the NSA (Natal Society for Arts) and the Durban Art Gallery. At the opening of the Volkskas 1994 regional show then president of the NSA, Mike McMeekan cited the FLAT as an important influence in the development of new art in Durban.

The FLAT and Johannesburg 'cousin' FIG Gallery join an international resurgence in alternative spaces, particularly in Los Angeles, Chicago and London. These spaces typically artist run, flexible and transient operate out of cheap, less conventional spaces, including: store-fronts, hotel rooms (for 24 hour stints), or various lounges and/or dining rooms (as in the case of FLAT). Though loosely fashioned on the 'alternative space' movement of the 70's, these contemporaries claim no association to the former, "avoiding the now popular clichés of empowerment and tokenism."

New York's White Columns and Johannesburg's Market Gallery are some of the 70s prototypes developed by artists feeling institutional neglect, and discontent toward the commercial galleries' preoccupation with object and profit. Alternative spaces in the US, funded by a young and ambitious NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) flourished in the 80s boom into the 'bureaucratic monoliths' of today. But in recent times these spaces have witnessed their style, appearance, policies of franchising the

statistically underrepresented and support for progressive and experimental art; be adopted by the larger institutions and the mainstream. In the 90s this crisis of assimilation along with an ever-increasing deficit in NEA funding has prompted the question: "Exactly what are alternative spaces alternative to?"

It is precisely the flexible nature and cavalier approach of the more 'light-weight' contemporary hybrids that has induced their reinvention of the alternative movement. FLAT for example has fragmented: Moe has established a warehouse (FLAT International) in Baltimore, while the South African contingent is satisfied to dabble in non-space activities including information retrieval and audio-production.

Though thoroughly adept in the conventions of installation, the members of FLAT are perhaps most notorious for their uncritical consistency in low-fi audio documentation and it is out of these unorthodox sound files that the two compact disks make their debut. "The principle is that it does not matter what you have to say - but it is vitally necessary that you say it," says Jay Horsburgh (aka Yaj Marrow) in a flyer propagating the situationist inspired event: *The First International Theatre of Communication*. And indeed he eats his words as the entire three-hour FLAT extravaganza in information transformation and audience participation is canned into a seven-minute track on the first CD. Speaking of the recording Allen points out that "it is the entropic nature of the performance, which is captured on the disk, and not the information traded at such an event..."

Other contributors to the first CD include Walker Paterson, Samkelo Matoti, Brendon Bussy and Rhett Martyn whose scatological outbursts (from the multi-media performance *Aural Hygiene*) evokes John Zorn's *Mikhail Zoetrope* of 1974. While the second CD is a somewhat subdued compilation of Allen's examination of the banality of social discourse. Monotonous at times it includes the provocative *Sell Your Body (After Reich)* a self-styled parody of Steve Reich's *It's gonna rain*.

In closing it is Barry's final words on disk one that reveal the FLAT attitude towards these cultural documents – "as much as the recording is capturing the tradition, it signifies its disintegration..." These limited edition disks are not recommended for those not attuned to subversion, banality, monotony or the erroneous manipulation of language.

The CDs included material that had been made in 1995 after the FLAT had closed, but in a continuation of the *Miracle Filter* process, this material was constructed out of the earlier FLAT recordings. This included works using segments from the *Internotional*, the 1993 New Year's Eve gathering, as well as some German simulcast recordings from TV2000. One of the more developed pieces was a work created from a early recording that featured Moonlight's voice called *Sell your Body (After Reich)* (1995).

In 1997, a debate had been ignited in South Africa over the representation of the 'other', specifically around the work of Candice Breitz, Minette Vari and Penny Siopsis. It began when Okwui Enwezor, the curator for the 2nd *Johannesburg Biennale*, wrote an essay in a Norwegian catalogue for an exhibition on South African art, criticizing these white artists 'use' of images of black women. Kendall Geers echoed these sentiments in a review for *The Star*, and an extensive response from Breitz followed. With this, an aggressive debate was catalyzed, and Breitz, along with Brenda Atkinson invited artists to contribute their perspectives on this critical topic for a collection of essays titled *Grey Areas*.

I chose to submit an essay that dealt with the issue through reference to the recording of Moonlight's voice at the FLAT Gallery, and my subsequent use of this in a sound work. My attitude about the use of his voice in this particular audio work was at that time extremely ambivalent, and so this catalyzed in me the effort to try and articulate some of my thoughts on both the work and the question of representing the 'other'. It is unclear whether *Gray Areas* was ever published and thus I conclude with this essay. *A BLACK VOICE* was written in November of 1997.

A BLACK VOICE

It has been with great interest that I have followed the recent debates around the issues of representation. I believe that cultural production within the particular historical conditions of post-apartheid South Africa throws into sharp relief issues that have broader relevance in a post-colonial world. More directly, as a South African artist I have found myself confronting these issues in my own work. This was most apparent when I created a sound work that involved the appropriation (both metaphorically and literally) of the 'voice' of a black African man. I was forced to address the complexities and contradictions that arise when one begins to speak across what was once an impenetrable wall. And then, in an effort to build on that 'conversation' one finds oneself engaged in what can easily become a form of suspect representation of the 'other'.

The roots of this particular work began in 1993 at the FLAT Gallery in Durban, South Africa. A group of artists, including myself, were obsessively recording all social interaction that took place at the FLAT. These recordings were made without censure or specific intention, only the urge to record (as neutrally as possible) the 'found sounds' of this environment and so produce a 'purposefully' uncritical social document. Often, the resultant tapes would be used as raw material for further sound pieces. While many of these works were built with ordinary sounds or words reduced through manipulation to pure sound, the most interesting were those created when the recorded words were not (at least initially) unhinged from their signifying function. This brought to the constructed sound piece both meaning and a definite speaker's voice. Though the subjects were aware of being recorded (so that this was never a surreptitious enterprise,) the very act of using and reusing voices other than my own was problematic in terms of (mis)representation, permission, ownership or even coercion.

At that time the FLAT had evolved into a space where artists gathered to work and exhibit. It had a free-flowing atmosphere with people coming and going. In apartheid South Africa it was not insignificant that this included a diverse group of participants. One conversation recorded among many took place during a typical late night session. Four men (all South African) engaged in what was a rather 'ordinary' late night activity for young men - drinking too much and talking about politics and women. What was not ordinary by apartheid era South Africa was the fact that one of the men, Moonlight, was black.

A grounds-keeper at the Natal Technikon, Moonlight had befriended one of the FLAT occupants, Thomas Barry. In a recorded conversation, Moonlight expressed this opinion on the subject of prostitution:

Black ladies, just stopping to sell your body!
 White ladies just stopping to sell your body!
 Indian ladies, just stopping to sell your body!
 Er... Colored ladies, just stopping to sell your body!¹

I was struck by these phrases. I would not presume to know what Moonlight ‘meant’, and our meeting was the result of such a rare contingency that we have not met again. Rather I seek to elaborate on the thoughts that his words provoked for me.

That the speaker, a black man, in speaking to women - all women - would address them as Black, White, Indian, Coloured seemed to me to reveal how thoroughly entrenched in one’s consciousness was apartheid’s notorious classification programme. In a system where any single individual was identified first by racial group, it was not surprising at the time that Moonlight would address each group separately. However, it also seemed significant that this ‘roll call’ put special emphasis on the fact that all women were included, and that no woman, whatever her race, was exempt from his warning. Such an admonishment to women from a man might imply respect, yet such a statement also begins to speak for women. The implication is: “Women should not...” and so reveals the complexity of a man speaking for women (his ‘other’).

That Moonlight had spoken to women and addresses each group separately revealed a complex dynamic of relationships across gender and racial lines; however the repetitive patterns of these phrases also asserted themselves on a purely formal level. Some months later, when I began to use the collected raw audio material to generate sound works, I revisited this conversation with Moonlight and ‘looped’ the above quoted sample. The original audio information was subsequently superimposed upon itself numerous times to produce a work that began with recognizable words and then progressed into a cacophony of sounds.

My initial influences for this process were the technical experiments of American composer Steve Reich, in which he constructed a ‘new music’ entirely from recorded words. More significant was the fact that he too appropriated voices in his work, and in two very important pieces, the voices of black men. They were a Pentecostal street preacher named Brother Walter, and a youth accused of murder in the Harlem Riots of 1964, Daniel Hamm. In the recording of

Brother Walter, Reich used words from a sermon on the Biblical Story of the Great Flood (“Its Gonna Rain”) and by superimposing repeated sounds created a cyclical ‘wash.’ He described the work by calling it “controlled chaos... appropriate to the subject matter - the end of the world.”² In this way he participated in the original message of the sermon. And Brother Walter is given credits in the liner notes.

The second example operated in a very different way: it also appropriated the ‘voice’ of another, but was originally produced, in part, for a benefit on behalf of the individual whose voice is heard. Reich describes the sources for the work *Come Out* in the liner notes of the CD:

Composed in 1966, it was originally part of a benefit presented at Town Hall in New York City for the retrial, with lawyers of their own choosing, of the six boys arrested for murder during the Harlem riots of 1964. The voice is that of Daniel Hamm, now acquitted and then 19, describing a beating he took in Harlem’s 28th precinct station. The police were about to take the boys out to be ‘cleaned up’ and were only taking those that were visibly bleeding. Since Hamm had no actual open bleeding he proceeded to squeeze open a bruise on his leg so that he would be taken to the hospital. “I had to like open the bruise up to let some of the bruise blood come out to show them.”³

Both the appropriation of another’s ‘voice’ and the formal manipulation of that voice are problematic. When words are reduced to pure sound there is risk of losing the potency of their original content. Yet it is significant that Reich’s work has overtly ‘political’ content and function created in the spirit of a ‘protest’; it is done for the benefit of another whose voice is ‘taken’. While work of this kind protests the suffering of another, it unintentionally reveals the divide between the experience of the one who ‘speaks’ (the artist) and the experience of the one ‘spoken of’ (the subject.) Is there merit in a work which allows the voice of another to be heard, but does so through manipulation. Is that merit somehow negated when formal manipulations ‘aestheticize’ these words into abstract sounds? Do such efforts speak accurately for the appropriated voice and if so with respect? Are these concepts ‘speaking for’ and ‘respect’ mutually exclusive? Reich’s abstracted sounds, appropriated from the voices of others, may be problematic, yet what would have been accomplished by leaving these voices silent?

These questions are resonant with the contradictions that were inherent in the so-called ‘resistant art’ of South Africa (from the 70s and 80s). The fact that the work of many White artists of this period was produced at a time when to remain silent, or not to speak of the ‘other’ in the

¹ Moonlight; ‘New Years Eve 93’, *FLAT Recordings*, Tape 2, Durban, FLAT, Dec, 1993

² Steve Reich; Liner notes from the CD: *Early Work*, Elektra Nonesuch; 1987.

³ Ibid.

face of outrageous injustices, would have been immoral. The alternative, to retreat into academic formalist abstraction or sanitized images, would have been unconscionable. Though justifiable at the time, some of these strategies may have been outgrown. Perhaps they now require a sensitivity to the complexities of ‘speaking for’ and ‘speaking of’. Clive Kellner addresses this when he points out that “speaking from one’s own position, not through that of the Other, will contribute to a heterogeneous, yet cohesive social politik.”⁴

And yet I wonder if it is possible (particularly in race-obsessed South Africa) to speak solely ‘of oneself’ *without* implicating the ‘other’? How can any self-critical process not make reference to that which is intrinsically present in its critique? Indeed, to deny individuals who occupy any particular ‘side’ (across gender, race or economic lines) access to representation of the ‘other side’ is to obliterate their mutual interaction, (even if that interaction be problematic.) The issue is perhaps not a question of ‘who has the authority to represent whom’ but rather, a need for more voices in the debate.

In exposing the contradictions that lie in any construction of ‘self’ and of ‘other’ we may begin to understand the dynamics of ‘otherness’ operating in a changing society. For this ‘otherness’ may reveal itself as a relative thing, not always rigidly located in one’s race, gender, or economic status solely. Rather, the complex composite of factors that make up each ‘individual’ shift with each social interaction and with each formation and reformation of affinities within a group.

The original recording of *Moonlight* was a document of an authentic social interaction between a black man and three white men. As with many FLAT tapes, the conversation revealed how awkward our efforts can be when we seek to communicate. I look back on that work without any clear resolution as to the ‘correctness’ of such an act, but I am certain that the encounter was significant in its implications. Both the original recorded materials and the resultant sound work are resonant with larger ‘conversations’ that are now taking place. Did I appropriate *Moonlight*’s voice ill advisedly? To have excluded him from the number of voices that I used (and still use) to create sound works would have been to remove a valid ‘voice’ from the FLAT documents.

⁴ Clive Kellner; ‘Cultural Production in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Trade Routes: History and Geography; The 2nd Johannesburg Biennale Catalogue*, 1997, p. 30.