

## **THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER**

### **April 17, 1994**

*Bakhtin stresses that laughter in this 'festive-comic' sense cannot be understood as a form of trivial ribaldry or light-hearted jesting. Rather, folk laughter expresses a distinctive ideological viewpoint which is diametrically opposed to the 'monolithically serious' world of officialdom: it is 'universal', it heals and regenerates, and it is linked to essential philosophical questions.<sup>102</sup>*

This *Festival of Laughter* was a group of concurrent exhibitions organized and sponsored by the National Arts Coalition (NAC) to coincide with the historic first all-democratic elections in South Africa. The general secretary for the NAC at that time, Mike Van Graan,<sup>103</sup> conscripted me to put up posters for BAT and then the NAC. I was at some point 'promoted' to coordinator for the Durban contingent of the *Festival of Laughter*. My job description included making calls to participants, designing posters and advertising the events. A number of themes were selected to correspond with various cultural venues in Durban and elsewhere. For example the *Burn-The-Sacred-Cow Sculpture Exhibition* was delegated to the NSA; while the *Nudge-Nudge-Wink-Wink-Be-Kind-To-Politicians Poster Exhibition* and the *Dying-Springbok-Sporting Emblem and Flag Cartoon Exhibition* seemed 'more appropriate' at the FLAT Gallery. Other events included the *Tango-To-Toyi-Toyi Dance Festival*, the *Not Approved by the Publications Board (or Cultural Desk) Short Story Competition*, and the *Not-by-Bread-Alone Banner Exhibition* which took place at the Natal Playhouse.

These irreverent titles, that seemed to fly in the face of 'seriousness' and 'political correctness' were timely and controversial. As the elections approached, artists debated the need for work that embraced the contradictions and complexities of the political arena. Humor was seen as a potential tool. This not only echoed the recognition of the 'ideological power' of humor in the

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Gardiner; *The Dialogics of Critique – Bakhtin & the Theory of Ideology*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 50.

<sup>103</sup> Van Graan at that time was also the director of BAT, the FLAT's main sponsor; and advisor to the Ministry of Arts and Culture.

face of ‘officialdom’ as expressed by Bakhtin, but also the spirit of Albie Sachs’ call to find new means of expression for the new South Africa.

An important book in South African Cultural Debates, *Spring is Rebellious* documents an original statement by Sachs and some 22 responses from artists, writers, cultural workers and political activists. (Indeed, in South Africa, are many individuals who embody all four). Written for an in-house ANC discussion in 1990, Sachs’ statement received “immediate, if controversial acclaim” according to Ingrid de Kok.<sup>104</sup> Here he first asks whether “we have sufficient cultural imagination to grasp the rich texture of the free and united South Africa that we have done so much to bring about”. He goes on to reconsider his earlier affirmation of “art as an instrument of political struggle” calling it now “banal and devoid of real content” and “potentially harmful”. He declares that “our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle”.<sup>105</sup>

As expected, voices of protest took objection. Many questioned whether such a statement would undo good work; others took issue with his assumption of ‘authority’. The specter of ‘non-political’ art, and therefore creative endeavors that were unmindful of cultural conditions must surely have alarmed many who had seen the struggle of political art in the face of apartheid censorship. But in what she saw as a “tongue in cheek” declaration, De Kok describes the importance of Sachs controversial declaration in this way:

This ironic prescription is followed by an analysis of “solidarity criticism” and the instrumental and “narrow view” of culture; these impoverish artistic production as well as the struggle, restricting the capacity of artists to move forward to expression that would “expose contradictions, and reveal hidden tensions”, and in doing so reflect the “emergent personality of our people”.<sup>106</sup>

Sachs speaks to the limitations of ‘political art’, by comparing a gun with a work of art in this way:

There is no room for ambiguity: a gun is a gun is a gun, and if it were full of contradictions, it would fire in all sorts of directions and be useless for its purpose. But the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions - hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Ingrid De Kok (ed.); *Spring is Rebellious*, Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1990, p. 9.

<sup>105</sup> Albie Sachs in *Spring is Rebellious*, Ibid, p. 19 – 29.

<sup>106</sup> De Kok; Ibid, p. 10 - 11.

<sup>107</sup> Sachs; Ibid, p. 20.



*The Nudge-nudge-wink-wink-be-kind-to-politicians poster exhibition*  
*The Dying-Springbok-sporting emblem and flag cartoon exhibition*  
*The Not for...*

SUNDAY

**FLAT**

APRIL 17 10:00-18:00

4 Manor Court,

Mansfield Road

Exhibition poster, 1994

He calls for a kind of cultural production that not only embraces the ambiguities, but also celebrates:

And what about love?... Can it be that once we join the ANC we do not make love any more, that when comrades go to bed they discuss the role of the white working class? What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including **our sense of fun** and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of the beauty of the world?<sup>108</sup>

In many ways, the *Festival of Laughter's* irreverent take on the upcoming elections was expressive of a similar attitude, and indeed provoked a similar protest. This move by the NAC, was, in a sense, politically confrontational on two fronts. It mocked the apartheid government, but, it also regarded **all** politics with a sense of parody and humor. It aroused opposition for the seemingly 'political incorrectness' of using 'humor' in the face of 'serious' political events.

In an ironic development, a white South African lecturer from the University of Durban Westville (UDW) Fine Art Department, Erica Clark wrote a letter to the *Natal Mercury* to protest the festival. UDW was traditionally a non-white university and notorious in South Africa for political activism. The Fine Arts Department was self-declared to be against a 'Eurocentric model' and featured in its curriculum attention to African and Indian Art History. The genres most typically explored in the studio work were painting, sculpture and printmaking. Clark's opposition to the spirit of the Festival read:

FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER IS A BAD JOKE

The Arts Coalition recently launched a campaign for the festival of laughter to be held just prior to the April elections. The blurb that accompanies forms inviting participation manifests a crassly superior disdain for the significance of April 26 to 28. Only a privileged and bored coterie of dillitantish liberals could conceive of a project gesturing at 'freedom of expression' in the midst of extreme social trauma. However naive seriousness might be under our circumstances, the trivial and the vain are hardly worthy alternatives. The art world has often enough heard the east catchphrase about whites "not suffering by proxy", but laughter and witticism take such a comfortable intellectualization to final banality.

E. Clarke<sup>109</sup>

This letter led to a debate between the Coalition's representative, Van Graan, and Professor Clark. Clark's criticism that a "bored coterie of liberals" could conceive of such a

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 20 – 21.

<sup>109</sup> Erica Clark; Letter to the Editor, *The Natal Mercury*, Durban, April 1994.

project in the “midst of extreme social trauma” was answered by Van Graan. In an article by Humphrey Tyler for the *The Weekly Mail*, Van Graan’s response is recorded:

Mike Van Graan, probably the least bored person in Durban, the general secretary of the National Arts Coalition, who conceived of the whole idea, leapt to attack in return the “extreme hypocrisy” of those who claim to believe in democracy, in “freedom of speech and the freedom to criticize, but only if it is on their own terms and only if it fits in with their own view of the world”. He pointed out that “the violence, the deaths, the burnings which we are experiencing are not ordained by the gods; they arise out of the power lusts and egos of politicians”.<sup>110</sup>

The irreverent theme of the Festival was carried out in several locations, and the FLAT gallery was asked by Van Graan to be responsible for the poster and cartoon exhibitions. An open call went out to all artists to submit work. As only a modest number of entries came in from the open call, the regular FLAT participants were moved to contribute a substantial amount of the works for the show. Also, in an effort to bring to what was an externally motivated event, we approached what could have been a rather conventional presentation of posters with some humor of our own. We hung the posters erratically, and we put fresh bananas on the floor, tables and even hung some from the walls. We also provided a cacophonous sound-track. The event was described by Tyler of *The Weekly Mail* in this way:

The timing was important - a week before elections, a national festival poking fun at politicians, with satirical posters, monuments, flags and comedy routines. The National Arts Coalition’s *Festival of Laughter* got off to a raucous start in Durban.

How appropriate in a way for a Festival of Laughter, but really. The slender young lady with rakish hips languidly stretched out a naked arm at the poster exhibition and lifted a banana off the old-fashioned light fitting. She peeled it, tasted it thoughtfully with her little pink tounge, then slipped it delicately between her pearly teeth. “Oh Shit”, said one of the organizers, “now they’re eating the artworks”. Well, yes. She obviously didn’t get the symbolism. Banana? Banana? Banana Peel? Foot? Get it? Slip? Funny? Laugh! It was the opening night at the FLAT Gallery on the Berea in Durban of the *Nudge-Nudge-Wink-Wink be Kind To Politicians Poster Exhibition*.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Humphrey Tyler; ‘Toyi-toying at the Sacred Cow Braai’, *The Weekly Mail*, Johannesburg, April 1994.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

Piers Mansfield, a student from Tech, constructed an installation in the back room which he sealed off with a black cloth. One could access his work by looking through a peep-hole in the cloth, only to be blasted with cold air from a fan that had been placed behind the screen. The line of viewers that formed called to mind an old trick: a prankster stands looking at a spot on the ground or through a keyhole. He looks at nothing, but a crowd gathers to see. In that same article, this was met with mixed reviews by Tyler, who had this to say:

The FLAT gallery is called the FLAT Gallery because it is a flat. When they have an exhibition they move the furniture out, hang the art stuff on the walls and sleep in the kitchen. This week in a nook there was a black curtain with a little hole in it and everybody queued up to peek through. Would there be an orgy? Bit of letdown actually. Inside there was a fan that blew on you and gave you a cold eyeball. It was difficult to see how it fit in but it attracted a lot of attention.<sup>112</sup>

He also goes on to describe two of the posters included in the exhibition:

Easier to comprehend was a mock street sign warning of dancing pedestrians entitled, “Let’s Twist Again” and a newspaper poster appropriately reflecting these strange times that said: “Miss SA’s row with lesbian skinhead.” Handing out mock ballot papers was a young woman called Adi Paxton, wearing a red nose. She explained she was a clown. She said you could vote for her as many times as you liked. “Take another ticket.” She said.<sup>113</sup>

Paxton was in fact a ‘professional’ clown and hired out her services to parties. The obvious connection her appearance made between ‘clowns’ and politicians was not lost.

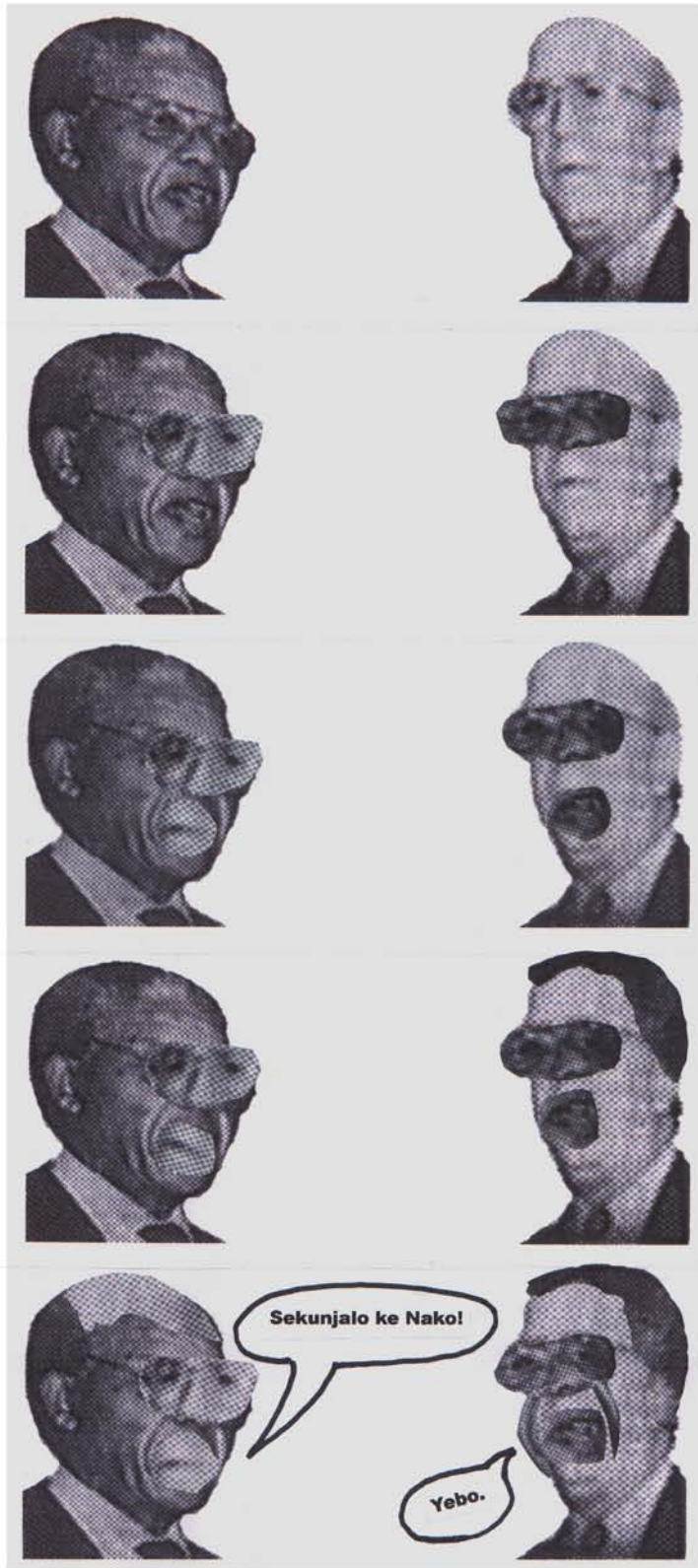
For the exhibition, I made a number of posters with cut-up Zulu language phrases, without translating or knowing their meaning. This was a project to which I would return with later sound works, when I sampled Zulu text in *Zulu for Medics*. I saw this as being somewhat problematic, in the sense that such an action might be regarded as an act of disrespect for a language that was not my own. And yet, these two projects catalyzed a number of interesting conversations between Zulu speaking friends and myself.

I was very intrigued with the idea of using a language, other than my own, in a way that would be truly unconscious. That is, I would have no idea what I was actually saying and the work would perhaps transgress boundaries through my lack of conscious control over its meaning. As Zulu speakers would question me about why I had said a particular thing, I would then go into a

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



THE FESTIVAL OF LAUGHTER  
An example from the cartoon and  
poster exhibition, 1994

conversation with that person and learn what I had just unconsciously expressed. Hence a dialog was catalyzed.

Barry and I also had “FLAT” printed onto shirts, which we wore at the event. Barry's shirt contained an extra phrase, “Annual production declines again”, which was printed over a set of international flags, thus making each undecipherable. A photograph was taken by Peter Engblom which shows Barry and myself wearing the FLAT shirts; and in the background the cartoon/poster showing a merged Mandela and de Klerk.

The FLAT event was opened by artist and lecturer, Jeremy Wafer, “who managed to raise quite a few laughs during his address”. In her article in *The Daily News*, Meijer goes on to quote Andrew Verster, who has this to say of the festival:

The message is clear. Never again will artists allow their voices to be silenced, our minds to be appropriated by anyone, not stolen, lent, bought, borrowed, shut-up or closed.<sup>114</sup>

Another article, which was penned “Tonight reporter” and printed in *The Daily News*, had this to say:

The aim is to assert freedom of expression by providing opportunities for artists and the public to practice it in a provocative, yet innovative and humorous form.... A FLAT Gallery spokesman said: “The country is moving out of an age of censorship and complacency and the last thing we need is to move back into another one.”<sup>115</sup>

The FLAT Gallery’s involvement was not limited to the poster/cartoon exhibition at the gallery. In addition to this production for the festival, a number of FLAT regulars also participated in other exhibitions that formed part of the Festival of Laughter. Most significantly, this was the *Braai the Sacred Cow* at the NSA Gallery.

For this, Horsburgh and Barry brought in a table and a chess-board, and for the entire evening played chess in the gallery.<sup>116</sup> I opted to make a work of art through a ‘profit-making performance’. I brought a braai into the gallery and cooked boerewors; filling the gallery with

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<sup>114</sup> Marianne Meijer; ‘Infectious laughter’, *The Daily News – Tonight*, Durban, April 1994.

<sup>115</sup> Tonight Reporter; ‘Let Your hair Down at Festival of Laughter’, *The Daily News – Tonight*, Durban, April 1994.

<sup>116</sup> Perhaps a thinly veiled reference to Duchamp.





Above: Allen & Barry at the FLAT during the opening of the 'Festival of Laughter', 1994. Photo by Peter Engblom.

Left: 1996 Press Cutting from the Mail & Guardian showing Peet Pienaar's 'performance' as a "rugby player in formal attire" outside the Hanel Gallery in Cape Town, Nov 8, 1996.

Right: SIEMON ALLEN, 'Boerewors - in advance of a reconstruction of a performance', 1994. To my knowledge, no images were taken of either the braaing performance or the chessgame at the NSA Gallery. This image therefor stands in as a substitute.

(It is taken from 'Biltong & Droewors', Cape Town, Struik, 1992)



Artist Peet Pienaar dressed as a "rugby player in formal attire" on a box outside the new Hanel Gallery in Cape Town. Instead of curator Robert Weinek delivering an opening address, Pienaar was asked to hand out cake to those present. A cross-section of leading South African and international contemporaries were on show inside, including the likes of Robert Rauschenberg, Joachim Schönfeldt, AR Penck, Wayne Barker and Lisa Brice. Some of Cape Town's trendiest bars opened specially to host after-parties. PHOTO: ADAM WELZ



smoke, as I sold rolls to the hungry audience. It was a not-too-subtle pun on the *Braai the Sacred Cow* theme, as well as a parody of the white South African national pastime.<sup>118</sup>

Most of the audience did not regard me as an ‘artwork’ and thought I was actually just providing food for the event. They did not seem to find it strange that I was in the middle of the gallery amongst the other ‘sculpture’ with my ‘title label’ on the floor in front of me. It amused me that I was at last ‘making a profit from my art’.

In the gallery, Horsburgh and Barry played chess, while I braaied. The ‘artist as art’ was a performance strategy explored by many South African artists in an attempt to bring his/her own identity to the foreground. Peet Pienaar, a Cape Town artist did a performance in 1996, in which he stood in front of the Hänel Gallery dressed as a “rugby player in formal attire”.<sup>119</sup> In this way he both referenced traditional white culture and critiqued it through a “white South African voice”.<sup>120</sup>

In a parody of government licensing stamps, Barry had also ordered an official looking stamp ‘engraved’ with the words “Artistic License”. He then invited people to produce their ID books, and stamped it on the page that was normally for **gun licenses**. It was a highly illegal act because any defacement of government property is or was punishable by imprisonment.

Walker Paterson, who was a regular FLAT participant and who had exhibited in the Papermaking exhibition the previous year discussed with me his work for the NSA exhibition:

**Allen:** Was your “Cape settlers with Colour Xerox” work exhibited on one of the *Festival of Laughter* shows?

**Paterson:** Yes

**Allen:** Could you talk about your motives for making this work?

**Paterson:** I had decided I wanted to make a work that reflected the tastes of the white middle-class who still watched ‘South African’ dramas about the Boer War. I also cynically suggested that they owned a print of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in the Cape that hung above the mantle piece. [An alternative version of this work, which “predates the arrival of Van Riebeeck”, can be seen on the following page.] Secondly I feel as a white South African it was my duty to do a piece on the arrival of Jan.

<sup>118</sup> The braai, or barbecue, is a cooking technique synonymous with the national sport of Rugby; and the national meat is boerewors.

<sup>119</sup> Staff Writer; *The Mail & Guardian*, Johannesburg, Nov 8, 1996.

<sup>120</sup> This question of how one might critique the colonial past and white South African culture from one’s own experience was raised by Kellner in an essay mentioned earlier in the context of Moe’s ‘security guards’. p. 149 – 156.



THOMAS BARRY, 'Artistic Licence', stamp, 1994



WALKER PATERSON, 'Amsterdam and Other Ships in Table Bay, 9th March 1636', postcard & colour photocopy, 1994

**Allen:** Can you comment on your ‘oblique political references’ in this work? Could you compare these ‘oblique political references’ to those in your later “house” pieces?

**Paterson:** The political references in this piece are obvious. Firstly the piece was made about a month before the first democratic elections in SA and I thought we shouldn’t forget the man and event that started it all. The house pieces are a direct result of the colonization of Southern Africa because they reference hostels and low-cost housing and the burning of them may have some reference to the violence that has plagued the country. Secondly I think both would look wonderful above the mantle piece.

**Allen:** What is the significance of the relationship between the original image and its colour photostat?

**Paterson:** The original image (in this work) itself is a copy of the original painting so therefore it is a play on the notion of copy. So if we look at the piece in this light we have to ask the question, did the piece actually exist in its original form? If it did not we have to question the validity of the piece altogether. Just think about it as talking about an artwork that may not even exist.

**Allen:** Can you draw other political conclusions from this work?

**Paterson:** Only that the copy of the postcard was not even a good one. It’s like the previous government still copying the mistakes of the government before them.<sup>121</sup>

The Festival of Laughter marked one of the few times that the FLAT collaborated with another arts organization. This was a fruitful experience, in that some interesting work was catalyzed by the provocative theme, but it was also in many ways problematic. The kinds of structures and means of operation that are inevitable in larger arts programs, in many ways were antithetical to those of the FLAT. Though the ‘theme’ of the Arts Coalition project was radical and stimulating, our participation, as a gallery and not as individual artists, at times felt forced. It was as if the plan called for a ‘grass-roots’ spontaneous participation, which was not possible to call up ‘on demand’. That said, however, one might also recognize that it was a ‘democratic process’ in which all expression whatever form it took was welcome. The democracy **here** most definitely gave one something to laugh at.

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<sup>121</sup> Paterson, Allen; Interview 7, Snail-Mail, April 98.

***SAM NTSHANGASE School Workshop  
May 1994***

Ntshangase continued to stay at the FLAT from time to time. When a number of his students from a rural school south of Durban won prizes in the prestigious annual arts competition for young artists, 'Face to Face', he made a proposal to the FLAT. As the lack of substantial transport did not allow for the children to come in the evening for the event, Ntshangase suggested that they come and work in the FLAT for the entire day. He brought the children to Durban to receive their prizes, and they spent the day before the awards ceremony at the gallery in 'art class' with Ntshangase. This led to an impromptu workshop at the FLAT gallery for the children. We were supportive of this use of the FLAT for a function outside that of an art exhibition site. For us, it spoke to the importance of a 'true' community space that could operate with the flexibility to serve an important unexpected need.



Sam Ntshangase with his students at the FLAT, 1994



PIERS MANSFIELD  
installation  
1994  
Above: Horsburgh in the installation



## **PIERS MANSFIELD**

**May 6, 1994**

Piers Mansfield, a fourth year student at the Technikon, presented an installation which resembled a stage set for a detective's office. Hinted in the invitation that he produced to announce the exhibition (a photocopied cheap Agatha Christie paperback cover: *Poirot - and the Case of the Murdered Millionaire*), Mansfield created a melancholic mood with props, lighting and music.

In the corner of the otherwise empty room, was a wooden desk with a chair. On the wall were hung an old wind up telephone, a fire extinguisher, a baroque mirror and a framed portrait of John F. Kennedy. A bare ceiling lamp hung above the scene and the music of Ornette Coleman set the mood. Inside the desk drawer could be found a spy novel.

It was a detective's office that seemed to reference several decades of American popular culture: from film noir movies of the 1940s and cartoon characters like "Dick Tracey", to 'cold war' spy hideouts; the setting evoked rich associations.

The mood was dark, the presentation austere: a few bare objects, a harsh light bulb. Indeed, the real detective work lay in the hands of the viewer, for the 'clues' and the 'script' were not explicitly stated. The work did not offer conclusions, but rather more sinisterly revealed how we, as young South Africans, were so often preoccupied with and influenced by American culture through the popular media of television, movies and comics. It brought to mind the question of why Mansfield, a South African, might use imagery that so strongly referenced 'American' history, implying that we were now engaged in an 'international' conversation rather than a local one. In a more subversive, subtle way Mansfield grappled with the strange displacement of American culture onto a South African context.



Horsburgh & Mansfield playing chess, 1994

***EXPERIMENTS & CONVERSATION***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 12)***  
***May 1994***

In this cassette, we again explored the possibilities of transforming language in a continuation of the processes employed with the *détournement* strategies of the *Miracle Filter* recordings. This is evident in the first segment of the tape, which features the voices of Barry, Horsburgh, Samkelo Matoti and Rhet Martyn, and in the final portion, which contains a ‘one sided conversation’ piece that I produced.

Martyn and Matoti were both sculpture students at the Technikon, who frequently visited the FLAT. Here, both joined Barry and Horsburgh in reading ‘found texts’ with random changes in accent and language. Barry, for example, would adopt at times a very heavy Afrikaans accent and would even break into Afrikaans occasionally. Horsburgh sometimes simulated the accent of a ‘B-movie’ Nazi German, while Matoti spoke in both English and Xhosa.

Much of the conversation is disjointed, as the languages and accents shift constantly, though Martyn appears in one segment to be ‘dueling’ with Horsburgh, to a noisy backdrop of music by *Rage Against The Machine*.

It was significant, that the language was ultimately indecipherable. At some point, we began to manipulate the tape speed and when slowed down, our words, particularly Matoti’s spoken Xhosa (as it was less familiar to us) became like ‘pure sound’; they moved in and out of signification to become abstract. Indeed the formal experimentation did not stop here. The work that followed marked the introduction and manipulation of ‘found sounds’ hence a kind of *musique concrète* was employed.

The term *musique concrète* is mentioned by Michael Chanan in *Repeated Takes*, a book on the history of recording and its effects on music. Here he speaks about the new genre of audio art calling it, “sonic montage, something like a cross between experimental radio and *musique concrète*”.<sup>122</sup> He points out that, “*musique concrète* came of age with the introduction of the tape

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Chanan; *Repeated Takes*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 139.

recorder, which allowed precise control over...techniques,”<sup>123</sup> and defines *musique concrète* through a discussion of the work of Pierre Schaeffer:

Pierre Schaeffer, a sound radio technician from Paris began experiments with ‘scratching’ records during the war and by 1948 had formulated a method of composition which freed the sonic material from association with its origins. Taking sounds from different sources, from pianos to railway trains, he produced a series of short pieces by playing them at different speeds, forwards or in reverse. Isolating fragments and superimposing them. This was *music concrète*, concrete music as opposed to music made by putting notes on paper...<sup>124</sup>

On the FLAT tapes, a formal experimentation with the use of recordings not connected to language, followed our multi-voiced conversation segments, and led to the creation of what might even be considered to be ‘music’. Though it was, of course, created from the recording of what would not be ‘conventional instruments’. Examples included the manipulation of electronic feed-back, the placement of a microphone into a fan, the slowing of a tape to half speed, and the recording of an ordinary clock-alarm. The idea was to ‘compose’ by creating sounds through a variety of means.

Indeed the composer, John Cage had experimented with ‘found sounds’ and created works with non-musical instruments, as well as the element of chance. In his book *Experimental Music, Cage and Beyond*, Michael Nyman writes about Cage’s first tape piece, *Williams Mix*, made in 1952:

[it] cut through the concrete/electronic distinction - a distinction which hinged on sound origins and technical methods - by building up a **vast library of sounds** and **using chance techniques** to dictate how the tape should be cut, spliced together and combined. He divided the available sounds into six categories: city sounds, country sounds, electronic sounds, manually produced sounds, ‘including the literature of the winds’, wind-produced sounds ‘including songs’ and small sounds ‘requiring amplification to be heard by others’. The comprehensiveness of the sound sources of *Williams Mix* and the potential presence of sounds in a performance of 4’33’’ make these pieces, if viewed symbolically, as demonstrations of **the availability of all sounds to the composer of the future**.<sup>125</sup>

Nyman also writes about the use of “ordinary sounds from the world” through a description of Schaeffer’s work:

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 140 – 141.

In the late 40s, Pierre Schaeffer was beginning to listen to common sounds - trains, bells, humming tops - and to experiment with these sounds with a curiosity and pragmatism not surprising in an ex-sound effects man. He recorded sounds on disc loops (tape not being available to him at that time) cut off the attack and decay of sounds, ran things backwards and at different speeds.<sup>126</sup>

Chanan, again in *Repeated Takes*, elaborates on earlier compositions of these and other composers working with manipulated recorded sound:

In the 1930s composers as diverse as Milhaud, Hindesmith, Varese and Cage had all experimented with discs played on variable speed turntables to create striking, though limited, transformations of sound. [In] *Imaginary Landscapes* (1939 and 52), Cage used combinations of turn-tables playing frequency test records and contact microphones made from electric guitar pickups. The most notorious was No.4 for twelve radios.<sup>127</sup>

The lines between what defines an ‘avant-garde’ musician, a sound artist or an audio artist become blurred. Chanan defines the term of ‘audio artist’ in this way:

‘Audio artist’ is a term that signifies a new movement in phonographic culture, a new kind of artistic endeavour, belonging to the 1980s alongside the rise of performance art and installation art: in fact it is one of the links between the two, since audio technology allows sound signals to be incorporated into both.<sup>128</sup>

He talks about what he calls the use of ‘raw sound’ in the production of ‘sound art’ and comments on Cage’s contribution in defining it as ‘avant-garde music’:

Raw sound too, which interests the audio artist for a variety of reasons, is also musically alien. It seems inescapable that if non-musical sounds were to acquire the potential of becoming artistic symbols, then by the same count they became music - unless music were to change. Kahn considers audio art, though composed, as something different from music, but it needed the work of composers like John Cage, who did things with noise, to challenge the ingrained habits of musical hearing and open up our ears. In this the relationship with noise is critical.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Michael Nyman; *Experimental Music – Cage & Beyond*, London, Studio Vista, 1974, p. 41.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>127</sup> Michael Chanan; *Repeated Takes*, London, Verso, 1995, p. 139.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, p. 138.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. 139 – 140.

The sound work on this FLAT tape came out of an experimental urge to first manipulate speaking voices to create pure sound unhinged from meaning, and led to the recording of various sources to make ‘music’. This work, which began with my making moaning sounds and putting the microphone into the fan could be seen as the appropriation of ‘noise’ and an investigation into a kind of ‘audio art’. The origins of a ‘new attitude’ towards noise could be traced back to the Italian Futurists and Russolo’s noise instruments according to Chanan, but as Nymans claims, it is Cage who opened up the “availability of all sounds to the composer of the future”.

The final section of the tape was an idea to record a conversation where only one side is heard. I was initially inspired by a Patti Smith album in which she appears to be talking to her father or boyfriend, but at no point in the conversation does he speak. This struck me as being very psychologically loaded. In this monologue, hypothetically set in a club or at the FLAT, I created a nervous conversation with someone of the opposite sex, who did not exist.

In this way, I sought to capture a sense of alienation through male sexual insecurity. The lack of a female voice on the tape not only recorded the lack of a female sexual presence, but seemed to reference masturbation through the notion of ‘talking to oneself’. This notion of the alienated voice was also explored through the use of the ‘exit line’.

The ‘exit line’ was used as a means to break with a conversation and referred to the awkward means by which one might sever social communication. Such phrases as, “Excuse me, I just have to quickly go to the toilet,” abruptly breaks a tie with whom one is speaking. In the case of this ‘conversation with myself’, there is an irony in the fact that there is none there. I am in a sense refusing to talk to myself.

Hi, how’re you? How’ya doing? I’m fine thanks...and yourself? Hmph...hmp...Whatcha gonna do later? Ya, I don’t know. I haven’t...I haven’t really thought about it or anything...but...I might, I might...ya...I might go...I supp...ya...OK [nervous laughter]...um...I think...I think I’m gonna go get another drink. Do you want anything? OK, I’ll see you later maybe. OK...bye...<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Horsburgh, Barry, Allen, Matoti, Martyn; ‘Experiments & Conversation’, *Flat Recordings*, Tape 12, Durban, FLAT, May 1994. This one-sided conversation piece was in some ways a preparation for my two-sided conversation piece performance with Elmin Engelbrecht at the *Internotional*.

***SHAFT/FLAT***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 13)***  
***May 1994***

To create the *Shaft/FLAT* sound work, Horsburgh used previously recorded works from earlier FLAT tapes and fused these with ‘found’ commercial Funk music, Brian *Eno’s Music for Airports*, as well as *Kenyan and Tanzanian Witchcraft Music*. Using very direct, low tech methods, he constructed this ‘fusion’ by playing the FLAT tapes and the music simultaneously on a double tape deck and then recording this live in the room with a second deck. For example, Horsburgh, manipulated the ‘Funky Music’ tape by starting and stopping it while also playing excerpts from the *Miracle Filter – Heaven* (Tape 11) and *The First Time* (Tape 1) tapes, recorded previously. Significant is the fact that the entire tape is ‘live’ and yet all the sound heard is previously recorded. In the background, on the tape, one can hear Barry and myself, and so it would be difficult to determine whether we were in fact actually present for the recording, or just ‘present’ through our recorded voices.

<b>Funky Music:</b>	If you need a one day lover... Just call 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 day lover. I'm a love machine in town, the best you can get... fifty miles around. [Super Max]
<b>Horsburgh:</b>	A revolutionary who preachers about love... It's got a damn nice ring to it! We are about people talking.
<b>Horsburgh:</b>	We should write poetry, Gabriel, you and me. We can be poets! Gabriel, you've done what!? What are cut-ups, Gabriel? I'm, I'm thinking about, like about Shakespeare. You know? Like bad verse. You're talking about cut-ups? God, you're in anti-art already, Gabriel ? Gabriel should be running this show. <sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Horsburgh; ‘Shaft/FLAT’, *FLAT Recordings*, Tape 13, Durban, FLAT, May 1994.

***BREAD & PLIERS***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 14)***  
***May 1994***

*Bread and Pliers* was a recording made with Nkosinathi Gumede, Barry and myself. Gumede, who had been living and working in the studio of Andries Botha, recorded this as a kind of ‘audio-letter’ to Botha, who was in America at the time. In this correspondence, Gumede describes among other news, an incident which led to the title, *Bread and Pliers*.

He had sold one of his sculptures, a constructed truck, with a pair of Botha’s pliers and a loaf of bread accidentally left inside. Our plan was to making a short 3 minute tape and mail it overseas to Botha. In the tape, Nkosinathi expressed his doubt as to whether Botha would return and relayed the details of an unfortunate situation in which he was mistakenly accused of stealing from a vending machine on campus.

***EXPERIMENTS***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 15)***  
***May 1994***

At this time I was experimenting with placing a microphone inside a Spanish guitar and amplifying bad playing and noises. This recorded material would later be overlapped onto *Zulu for Medics* thus making a highly clear and audible language tape almost inaudible. It was in part an experiment without any ‘thematic intention’ and in part a humorous work equating the difficulty of learning a new language with that of learning to play the guitar. The wrenching sound of my unskilled guitar playing gave the tape an uncomfortable mood.

***BIENNALE PROPOSAL***  
***Audio Recording (Tape 16, Side B)***  
***May 1994***

On side B of the this tape are experiments with feedback and the first version of *I Knew These People*, a soliloquy I sampled from the Wender's film *Paris Texas*. The film deals with a man's obsessive relationship with his wife, and here I listened to the original soundtrack on earphones and then recorded myself reciting the text out aloud. This along with *Zulu for Medics* was my first individual audio work and was exhibited on that year's *Volksskas Atelier*.

Unlike my audio performance for the *Internotional* with Elmin, made at the same time, in both these pieces I utilized the actual sound equipment as a found-object in the final presentation in the gallery. I installed the piece by hanging a small cassette recorder from the ceiling which played the ten minute recording.

The idea of presenting the hi-fi as a found-object appealed to me, because it was a continuation of my exploration of the notion of displaying the 'consumer icons' of middle class male youth. The year before I had begun to make display case sculptures with such personal items as my Hardy Boys books, Doc Martens and a logo T-shirt. *The Hardy Boys* (1993) and *Shirt and Boots* (1993) were works that came out of this interest, as well as in *Songs for Nella* where the speakers became a part of the 'sound installation'.

At the end of the tape is a conversation between Barry and myself where we discuss ideas for a funding proposal for the *1<sup>st</sup> Johannesburg Biennale* fringe. The fringe was to be a group of exhibitions/projects that were to happen in Johannesburg at the time of the Biennale, but not take place in the 'official' venues. Our plan was to propose to the Biennale committee that they fund our FLAT activities up in Johannesburg to coincide with the Biennale, and that we would run it virtually as we had in Durban.

Inadequate time prevented the proposal from ever being submitted. However, this recording captured a slice of the dialogue in which we were engaged. At that time, Barry was also working on another fringe proposal for what would become *Emerging from the Kingdom*, co-curated with Terry-Anne Stevenson. Which **was** realised at the Biennale.



**Allen:** It is about decolonizing as opposed to ‘doing something about’ decolonizing, like trying to make an artwork about decolonization.

**Barry:** It’s more about creating a space, a decolonized space, than about presenting work that is preoccupied with decolonization. I’m sure that they have unwritten rules. In a way our only saving grace or redeeming factor is that we have applied and we’ve got a gallery and that is that. It’s not a national gallery, it’s an **alternative gallery**. We are dealing with contemporary issues. We are dealing definitely with those issues. We aren’t dealing with money. Non-profit. In terms of that, there should be no question. We are basically marginalized. We are dealing in a marginalized area and in terms of that it would be odd if we were snubbed totally. It would be a contradiction in a way. Fuck, if they getting 50 000 international curators and all the national galleries and shit. There’s this tiny, little fart-arse gallery which is doing relatively dynamic stuff and is managing to survive without making any profit and without pilfering the pockets of people who are producing profound pieces of...

**Allen:** ...potatoes!

**Barry:** ...Basically we will be looking for accommodation and a dynamic space for interaction where people do show work and we do whatever from installations to anything.

**Allen:** You know another thing that we must consider, is the fact that it is going to be living, it is going to be happening all the time. The Biennale itself is probably only going to happen in the first week and then after that it’s going to die down. It’s just going to be a continuous show for two months and we are going to be living there for that whole time, we are going to be active, so people... The art is actually going to be continuous. We are going to be always active; the other people’s exhibitions are going to be static.

**Barry:** Well we will sleep sometimes.

**Allen:** At the end of the Biennale when people come to take their work down, we are still going to be having exhibitions.

**Barry:** Ja, that’s nice.

**Allen:** Like a living art work.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Barry, Allen; ‘Biennale Proposal’, *FLAT Recordings*, Tape 16, Durban, FLAT, May 1994.

**CONVERSATION**  
***Audio Recording (Tape 16, Side A)***  
***May 1994***

On side A of this tape is a scripted conversation that I recorded between Elmin [Engelbrecht], a well-known fashion-designer, and myself; which was to be used in our performance *Conversation* at the *Internotional* (described below in the *Internotional* section). This recording also provided raw material for many future audio experiments including *Especially the Fact that I Don't Have a Car*, *Conversation 2*, and my audio performance at the FLAT, *Songs for Nella*.

In this recording, we were trying to self-consciously manufacture a typical dead-pan, banal conversation between a Durban man and woman. We were in a sense critiquing the banality or lack of substance in general conversation that we felt was epidemic among our peers. This critique included ourselves. We wanted to confront what we saw as a crisis in our generation and to address the non-confrontational, politically-detached intellectual laziness of white middle class youth in Durban. But we sought not only to address a broad critique of what we saw as a kind of moral ambiguity in our generation, but also reveal the banality in conversations between men and women, over sexual boundaries. We wanted to capture the nervousness of both and/or the psycho-sexual complexities in male and female conversation.

We chose to 'set' our scripted exchange at a gallery opening or club, and to recreate a situation where two people, meet, and partake in a conversation that is formal and unimaginative. Hoping to expose the 'ritual' aspect of exchanges where all the questions and answers are predictable and disallow any substantive connection, we wanted to expose conversations of this kind as being not just lazy, but disingenuous. Not only did this address our concerns with the lack of honesty in communication between men and women, but the disturbing implications of a communication so disconnected from the political realities around us.

Elmin also addressed the notion of 'rupture'. She talks about how she deals with people who ask her how she is and are not really expecting an answer. If instead of saying: "Ja, I'm fine," she says "No, I'm not well..." When this causes a 'splice' or rupture in the banal flow of general conversation, she observes that it often leads to the quick insertion of the oldest small talk convention - the weather. It was fitting that our critique of communication would be staged at the *First Internotional Theater of Communication*, which followed in May 1994.

*EXCERPTS from  
CONVERSATION.*

*Below are two takes of  
artificial conversation  
which Elmin & I  
fabricated for the  
Internotional. Take 2  
was used at the  
Internotional while Take  
I was used in later  
sound works of mine.*

**Take 1**

**Allen:** Hi, how are you?

**Elmin:** Hello, how're you?

**Allen:** I'm OK and yourself?

**Elmin:** Ja, ja I'm alive.

**Allen:** Well, what'ya doing?

**Elmin:** I'm talking to you over a microphone...

**Allen:** No, man, don't be silly.

[Laughter]

**Elmin:** Joke, joke.

**Allen:** So, so how ya doing?

**Elmin:** I'm well, ja.

**Allen:** Well that's great

**Elmin:** And you?

**Allen:** I'm OK... I'm just er... hanging around, just doing my own thing

**Elmin:** Ja, me to

**Allen:** So have you done anything interesting lately?

**Elmin:** Ja, ja I actually have

**Allen:** Like what?

**Elmin:** Ar... just like a lot of things.

**Take 2**

**Allen:** Hi, how are you?

**Elmin:** Hello, I'm very well and you?

**Allen:** I'm OK and yourself

**Elmin:** Groovy, groovy.

**Allen:** What'ya doing?

**Elmin:** Oh, Just hanging around

**Allen:** Ja, me to. Nice paintings these aren't they?

**Elmin:** Ja, well I can only see one.

**Allen:** I hate coming to these exhibitions...

They're really terrible [false laughter]

**Elmin:** I don't know it's the first time I've been to one like this.

**Allen:** Is it? Ja, so... um...

**Elmin:** But I'm not there yet.

**Allen:** Is it. What do you mean?

**Elmin:** I don't know, I'm still going to the exhibition, I think. Are you there already?

**Allen:** Um... I don't know, I'm not really sure.

**Elmin:** It feels as though we've had this

conversation before

**Allen:** Ja I know what you mean I think. We probably have I guess.

**Elmin:** I think we did. But how are you?

**Allen:** I'm OK

**Elmin:** Have you been up to a lot of good?

**Allen:** Um well, I've been doing work mainly I haven't done any artwork for ages. I've only been doing like making money and shit like that. I guess um... um... So what'ya doing later?

**Elmin:** I thought I might go to the Rift.

**Allen:** Oh ja, I haven't been there in ages

**Elmin:** Ja, neither have I.

**Allen:** Is it nice?

[Laughter] No, I know

what it's like I'm talking shit I guess

**Elmin:** No well I think it changes, you know. Sometimes it's really nice at the Rift and sometimes it's really kuck. Normally when its really bad I don't go there for quite a long time. Then I go there to see what its like.

**Allen:** Ja, for sure

**Elmin:** The last time I've been there was actually very nice

**Allen:** I actually wouldn't mind going there tonight, seriously.

**Elmin:** Really?

**Allen:** Ja

**Elmin:** It's actually quite a good idea.

Should we go?

**Allen:** Maybe

**Elmin:** See are you in the mood now? Cause earlier you didn't really feel like going

**Allen:** Ja, I don't know um... I'm in the mood, I'm mean, I'm just in the mood to just have a good time, I guess.

**Elmin:** I guess you're

on your 2nd glass of wine, that's why.

**Allen:** Second?

[Laughter]

*After we had attempted a number of our 'self-conscious' takes, we did manage to get into some substantive conversation. Indeed, although unintentionally, some of these words would later be used in other sound projects for example ESPECIALLY THE FACT THAT I DON'T HAVE A CAR.*

**Allen:** OK. Well now that the conversation has ended, should we talk about things that we wouldn't normally talk about on tape?

**Elmin:** OK. It could be dangerous though.

**Allen:** What do you want to talk about?

**Elmin:** I don't know

**Allen:** Here endith the recording. What do you want to talk about? This will be totally edited.

**Elmin:** It's quite nice because it's like it's a bit of a risk. It sounds good and then you leave it on. So it's a risk to me because you're doing the editing.

**Elmin:** My childhood dream has always been to fly.

**Allen:** Really?

**Elmin:** Ja, my body flying and not my mind flying or being in... in something that makes me fly. You know... just physically being able to fly without any help. That's always been my childhood dream. And sometimes when I feel... feel really trapped, I often get this... this... I don't even know how to describe this feeling I get inside of my stomach. There's someone scratching from inside me. And I get really frustrated, and I feel as though I am a wild animal trapped and all I want to do then is just to fly. Just want to fly. And sometimes I get so bad that I want to escape from my body and I just start

scratching my body trying to break through it. And eventually it just exhausts me so much that I... that I just... just become numb and fall asleep.

**Allen:** That's fine.

**Elmin:** I would still like to know what to do in situations like... that I... I'm still not able to...

I'm still not able to actually know what to do with myself in situations like that. Let alone other people. They... they know less than I do what to do with me. Do you sometimes feel like that?

**Allen:** I feel... I feel... Often like I've gotta be on my own, you know. And I've created this kind of studio for myself which is... it's more like a room. It is a room... OK... where I can just go. I have the only key to it. But... um... it's a room where I keep some sort of private stuff. Not really but stuff where I can go to and be on my own and private and kind of safe you know... um... as opposed to this place which is totally always, kind of... um... moved in upon. Its kind of like this place is always open.

**Elmin:** It's always a gallery?

**Allen:** Ja, its always kind of vibrant. It's always penetrated, you know. This place is permanently penetrated like permanently fucked. I suppose I can use that as a metaphor. But, not really, it just a place.

**Elmin:** I know what you mean. Ja, I do... You see I understand completely what you are saying and I used to be like that when I was a little girl I had this special place where I had this... um... this plant growing in our garden. I guess it's not a plant, its more like a eh... don't know what you call it in English

**Allen:** Say it in Afrikaans.

**Elmin:** Struik [shrub] It's... It's like... um a small little tree, you know, and it grows really dense and people use it for um... to put around there homes.

Anyway but this place it was really dense and very green and made the most amazing tunnels inside. And it had these beautiful yellow flowers growing on it and if you crawl inside of it it's like crawling into a new world. And no one knew you could actually crawl underneath this um...

this plant or tree or hedge or whatever. So I could crawl in there and no one would know I was there. I was all by myself. It was like my secret place and think that's, that's more or less like the place you are... It's where I can be alone and could be myself. But now... now I'm really lucky. I can actually be by myself while I'm here, while I'm now in the room with you, while I'm in the room with a lot of people. I can be totally on my own and I've

actually perfected it where I can even make them believe that I'm with them but I'm not. Where I'm in my own world by myself in my little space and they actually not even aware of it. I think it took me 22 years to perfect that. It works really well for me.

**Allen:** Ja

**Elmin:** So whenever I need it, I can escape into it. I never even physically have to move or change... change venue. Just change the state of mind and soul. It's really convenient. Especially the fact that I don't have a car.

*This fragment of conversation was used on CONVERSATION II, where I edited out my voice to make as if Elmin was talking to herself. [On FLAT CD I]*

**Elmin:** Ja, got three brothers. My brothers are great. It was so strange when I was a little girl I always thought you had to choose to have a favourite brother. But my favorite brother's my oldest brother cause he always read me stories.

**Allen:** Why was he your favourite brother?

**Elmin:** Cause he read me stories. I always took out children's books and then he would read them to me. But I always thought it's because he's being nice to read it to me but actually he...

actually liked the stories. He enjoyed reading them for himself.

[Laughter]

**Allen:** Which was...

Which was the brother that had... that had the motor-bike accident?

**Elmin:** That's my youngest brother. Anyway so my oldest brother was my

favourite brother and I thought he is the most intelligent person in the world and there's

nothing that he doesn't know and he can answer anything. Whenever I read a book and I didn't understand a word, I would go and ask him and he would always know. He would always know what... what the answer is. What it

means. And I, I don't know, I guess he was like my hero. But then one day... one day I wanted him to read a story to me and I think he was tired. He was in Angola [Border War] at that time in the army and he came home for the weekend and he hadn't slept for two days. So he was home and I

**Allen:** How old were you?

**Elmin:** I was very young I think about five or six years old. And I wanted him to read a story to me... and he was so irritable with me and I kept on asking him and I guess I was being irritating. And then he slapt me. And from that day on he was not my favourite brother anymore.