

'Open Circuit' at the NSA

by Paul Edmunds - www.arthrob.co.za : archives - november 2000 : 'open -circuit'

The title of the exhibition, the name of the project of which it forms part as well as that of the organisation which facilitated its realisation, all seem to contain an inordinate amount of contradictions. An 'open circuit' is both a broken-down system and one which is inclusive. **The exhibition (and the conference which it accompanied) came about through the Pulse project, initiated by Durban-based artist and former Rijksakademie student, Greg Streak.** Pulse is a term which incorporates both the cold blue light of an electronic signal and the warmth and texture of a heartbeat. This project is taking place under the aegis of RAIN, the Rijksakademie International Network. The name of this organisation brings with it the promise of fertile ground and growth along with the spectre of acid rain from first world industry, falling on the developing world to the South. These apparent contradictions, however, prove themselves to be the extreme poles between which the rich and vigorous dialogue takes place in this exhibition. This aspect of the project set out especially to explore the juxtaposition of technology with tradition which is so characteristic of many countries in the developing world. South Africa, and Durban especially, with its unique cultural diversity, is an ideal context in which to undertake such a debate. Several Durban-based artists participated as did a number of artists from Johannesburg. Former and current residents at the Rijksakademie, who are involved in other RAIN projects, came out for the show, and there was also work from an American.

In the conference and publicity which preceded the opening of the show in Durban, much was made of the centre / periphery debate. This dialectic was seen to operate on many scales, starting with the works themselves, the issues they explore, radiating out to embrace the whole context in which artmaking is created and received. It was pointed out that Durban itself exists in the margins of an already marginalised art world. The works deftly and effectively explored this dialectic in all its forms from the personal to the political, and from the physical and sensual to the intellectual and spiritual. As part of a growing dialogue, facilitated by the RAIN project, the exhibition and project as a whole was, I believe, a highly effective and well-realised event and will contribute considerably to the South - South dialogue it is fostering between countries with similar cultural circumstances.

Perhaps it would seem unfair to single out Streak's own piece on the show, for fear of accusing him of designing the whole affair around his work, but to my eye it was a real standout. Situated on the steps leading from ground floor to the mezzanine, entitled Artist's Breath, the work is infused with pathos and mystery. A compressor, operated by a timing device, is connected by a clear tube to a balloon mounted on the wall above. The compressor intermittently inflates the balloon which then slowly returns to its sorry, flaccid state. The relative crudeness and simplicity of its mechanism belies the true poignancy of the piece. Simultaneously debunking the myth of the heroic artist and his products and commenting on the loneliness and seriousness of the creative endeavour, Streak presents the artist as both the source and passive receptacle of inspiration. Without a life-supporting blast from the compressor, or technology incarnate, the balloon, the artist, is limp and useless. The origin of the word "inspiration", with its roots in the Greek word which means both spirit and breath, comes to mind. It is quite extraordinary the way Streak extracts a personal and sociological metaphor from a simple, non-representational and neutral mechanism; how he manages to invest this fairly benign setup with so much humanness.

José Ferreira's video piece, entitled Suburbia, takes up where Streak leaves off (Ferreira was a student in Durban at the same time as Streak and is now resident in Johannesburg). Equally simply, he takes a more ominous, almost dramatic look at the intrusion into the personal by the technological. A pool of light filled by the silhouette of what looks like a massive military aircraft, moves over the landscape of Ferreira's cool blue bedclothes. This is accompanied by a low, relentless rumbling. Although somewhat more spectacular, the work is not as metaphorically rich as Streak's but succeeds in creating a threatening, almost futuristic atmosphere.

Sharmila Samant from India, also a former Rijksakademie student, presents a video piece entitled Global Clones. Her video monitor is mounted at the mezzanine level in such a way that one looks down onto its horizontally-oriented screen. While resident in the Netherlands, she collected women's traditional shoes from countries which described the path from there to India. At a slow, steady pace, each disembodied pair of shoes takes one step before it slowly segues into another pair which follows, on the path to India. The idea of a painstaking journey from the First to the Third worlds is invoked. The lot of the women who might still wear these shoes in countries further to the South, as well as those who did in the past in countries further to the North, is marked by these steps. The true distance between the First and Third world is measured by this journey.

Mark Bain, currently resident at the Rijksakademie, pulls off a work which is almost a subversion of technology and has a wonderful maverick air about it. In Sense City, he places geophonic sensors in various hidden places in the architecture of the gallery. (Geophonic sensors are small electronic devices used by geologists to investigate geological structure and events). These sensors pick up vibrations in the building's materials, some of which are caused by external noises travelling through the building. He then broadcast these sounds with a small radio transmitter, providing an old radio and headphones in the gallery on which one could "listen to the building". The signal could be picked up within a 1km radius as well. You could make out voices, music from the adjacent restaurant and a series of unidentifiable vibrations, moans and creaks. I was reminded of high school physics where we learned that solids conduct sound better than both liquids and gases. It was hard, I recall, to tangibly experience such a fact. In an interesting way Bain deconstructs the solid, permanent materials of the building's structure and reconfigures them into a series of waves and pulses which are so insubstantial one needs an electronic device to decode them. The use of a common, simple electronic appliance like a radio, straddles the distance between the specialised researcher and the garage enthusiast. Bain evokes a murky, ephemeral sense of the impressive, solid building in which you find yourself.

Siemon Allen, formerly from Durban and now resident in the US, is showing the piece he made for the FNB Vita awards in 1999. Pictures and Words consists of Tintin comics cut with the text altered in a really "lo fi" way. In this series he muses, often ironically, on the complex political and historical landscape in which the art world operates. Issues of cultural appropriation and colonialism come to the surface against a backdrop of often confusing or nonsensical vignettes from various Tintin stories. Jeremy Wafer blurs the boundary between artifact and mass production in the two horizontally mounted dimpled and textured staff-like objects which he has left untitled. Andries Botha gives local audiences a rare glimpse of part of his large series entitled What is a Home?. A lone missionary figure, stooped and shielding himself from the sun with a steel umbrella, sails an insubstantial coracle-like boat on a sea of nylon rope. He appears from the position of his

umbrella, to be sailing South from someplace in the North, in search of either a home for his doctrine, or judging from his demeanour, hands clasped to his chest, for himself.

The show was opened with a performance by Robin Rhode and other participants include Kendall Buster from the US, Isaac Carlos who is Angolan born but now resident in the Netherlands, as well as Stephen Hobbs and Kathryn Smith from Johannesburg. James Beckett, from Durban and off to the Rijksakademie next year, produced a piece especially for the show too.

Streak's curatorial hand is succinct, accurate and firm, granting the works the discretion and privilege they require in order to flourish in the way they do. There is a fit and vigorous air to the show as a whole, and for the most part the debates have been opened up in a fresh and competent way. There was certainly no evidence that young artists are not capable of dealing with the complex landscape which this show attempts to navigate. This project is hopefully the first of at least four which will take place, each choosing to engage with issues pertinent to the practice of artmaking in developing and Third World countries. Similar projects are running concurrently in various other places including India, Argentina and Brazil.

The show closes on November 22

N S A Galleries, 166 Bulwer Road, Glenwood, Durban, South Africa, 4001
Postal address: P.O. Box 37408, Overport, Durban, South Africa, 4067
TEL: (031) 202-2293
EMAIL: iartnsa@mweb.co.za