

Carol Brown interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Durban, South Africa, 18 July 2006

This is a verbatim transcript of a recorded interview. It should be noted that when engaging in spoken conversation, people do not phrase their thoughts in grammatically correct sentences. These imperfections have been retained in this transcript.

Paul Sendziuk: Ok, so this is an interview with Carol Brown on the 18th of July 2006. We're at the Durban Art Gallery at City Hall and it's a quarter past three. Carol, I want to start off by asking your opinion about the current, or the most recent, advertising campaigns for HIV prevention that can be seen around the city on billboards and on the television, the 'loveLife' campaign...

Carol Brown: The 'loveLife', yes. Well, I think you've probably picked up already that 'loveLife' has been extremely problematic in terms of getting to the correct target audience in that they are overly subtle and often they just don't get the point across which is one of the problems. The other problem is in the representation of the healthy body, with the subtext being that the unhealthy body is somebody to be stigmatised [i.e. prejudiced] against. There's too much emphasis on staying beautiful, staying pure. And, of course, the whole sexual behaviour thing, too, is very unrealistic in today's world in terms of abstinence being promoted. So I think there are a lot of very problematic issues in that. I've found it quite interesting myself sort of being aware of the whole 'loveLife' campaign but in the rural areas it seems to be extremely prevalent; I don't know if you're aware of this, it's something which I just noticed because I've recently been going – for other purposes – to rural areas and the very small Zulu land areas and so forth. [Momentary interruption while Carol talks to a staff member] And a lot of it is English whereas the language there is predominantly Zulu. And, again, the people in those areas are not sophisticated people, they don't have access generally to a great deal of media and so forth, so the subtlety of the campaign – it almost seems pointless. It has been a very heavily funded campaign up until recently. I think they appear – in some of their media releases and that – they do appear to be modifying and becoming a little bit more realistic and sort of saying, "You can live if you're HIV positive, you can live well" and so forth instead of this almost total denial of the fact. I think the cutting of the funding for a while seems to have given them a bit of a wake up call.

Can you compare it to Jan's billboard project and how he's trying to do something different, and what possibilities his project might have as opposed to the 'loveLife' billboards?

Yeah, I think the whole billboard issue has a lot of inherent problems as well. You see even Jan's billboards are, again, reaching a level perhaps – sorry. [A momentary interruption as Carol speaks with a staff member] I think billboards – bringing art out into the street by way of billboards – is a great idea but I'm not sure if art as it appears on Jan's billboards is direct enough for the target audience. It's nice for us as art people, you know, ideally we'd like everybody to appreciate and understand art, but I'm not quite sure if a lot of those works communicate explicitly enough. I think he's only put out a couple of billboards, but I know the portfolio from which they're taken – we have a

copy here – and as a fine art, as a gallery work, it's great, but I'm not sure if it's the appropriate thing for billboards.

So out in the community people might not necessarily have the visual language through which to be able to access it?

This is it, yes, yes. And the official language in South Africa is very unsophisticated really. It's pretty much direct. If you really want to get that type of message across – we haven't got the same community as in America where perhaps kids are exposed to fairly sophisticated TV cartoons, art programs, you know, it's – it definitely is a less sophisticated audience. So I think that's where the whole issue of art and AIDS does have a lot of problems; there's a lot of problems in trying to get to grips with what actually we are achieving here in our context.

We know about HIV...

Often the, what do you call it? The converted talking to the converted and this is where it's problematic.

But at the same time you're hoping that the people who do have a more sophisticated visual language are the educated elite and those educated elite are also in positions of power, they're in the government and they're the ones who will come into the gallery and look at the works and maybe understand them on the billboards and hopefully get some messages that way.

Well, I'm not so sure if that statement about the elite coming into the galleries is true. [Laughs] You know, when one considers the history of South Africa and the education and so forth, our young elite are generally not that visually literate because it's never been part of their schooling, and the schooling here is getting worse in terms of visual or cultural literacy in general. School is about preparing you for work situations; you know, those subtleties are not being taught and I think we all know that you actually have to learn to read art, so I'm not even sure if we're getting through to those people. I think we aren't, because if we were, we wouldn't have the situation we have now with our government and so forth.

We know about the level of HIV within the general population in South Africa – it's very high and South Africa has really struggled to contain the number of new infections. What about HIV within the art community? What's your understanding of the number of artists who might be HIV-positive or who've already died of AIDS? Are you aware of any, for example? Or...

You know, I don't know if there's been any statistics, I don't know, I don't think there have been. In South Africa it's definitely a racial [issue], HIV/AIDS is far more prevalent among black people. So it's difficult to judge [whether artists *per se* have been infected] because there have been quite a few young black artist who have – I can give you a couple of names – who have died from AIDS but I don't think that that's actually got anything to do with them being in the art community. I think it's just a general demographic sort of coincidence, if you can put it that way. I don't think it's any more prevalent really in South Africa than...I mean, the American artists of the '80s, it's also

not the situation anymore so we're not really looking at it any longer I don't think particularly hitting the arts community. And of course it was all a gay issue then as well and, you know, I mean the stereotype is that gay people are artistic, get AIDS, and you know, I think there's big question marks over the whole thing, especially now because I think in America the gay population is the least affected at the moment.

They've been the most successful in, yeah, stemming the rate of new infections...

From what I understand it's affecting the heterosexual black population there as well, so it's quite interesting that this is how it's been in South Africa all along and now it's...

I asked that question because in America by the end of the '80s...

Oh, sure, the end of the '80s, yes.

...they had implemented 'A Day Without Art' because of the devastation with art communities and I'm wondering if...

It's not been like that here, no. I think I could almost with certainty say *no*, it really is an issue of poverty, you know. I don't want to echo Mbeki here, but that is the reality of it. It's access to treatment and access to education and prevention and education. And of course different forms of patriarchy, roles of women, you know, all these things are very, very causative of it here. So I don't think art really comes into it.

We know that in South Africa people are still very reluctant to get tested and definitely to disclose their status because of discrimination, the stigma of the disease. Is it possible that that might also be happening with artists who might be HIV infected but not willing to disclose because of that reason?

[Pause] You know, it's a difficult question for me to answer quite honestly. But, you know, generally speaking, because of the lack of treatment people don't actually last that long once they're HIV-positive and not getting treatment. So I think it would've become more apparent by now, I think is what I'm trying to say. Had that been the case, we would've had far more artists dying and it's hardly known at all among, you know, among the white artists there's hardly any incidents of it. But the artists that we've been personally involved and who died of AIDS have been rural people who, you know, often didn't even know what they had, and one has just assumed it's that [i.e. AIDS] 'cause they haven't even disclosed, the families haven't told [what] it was.

Tell me about when you started to get involved in curating shows that dealt with HIV. Was that when the International AIDS Conference came to Durban in 2000 or were you involved earlier before that?

Well, are you talking now about my sort of personal involvement with the gallery? Ok. My first involvement with HIV/AIDS was in 1996 – before I was director, well it was just about a cross-over period, I was education officer here – and I linked up with an organization called 'Open Door' which was an AIDS counselling institution and we did a project – in fact – no, we haven't got it on view at the moment – we did a workshop with a lot of HIV infected people as well as other people on making chairs with AIDS

statements – and then we took them and that led to another project. I've always sort of worked with human rights, you know, I started that sort of back in the '80s with 'Art for Human Rights'. And then we did another one called 'Squares Up to Human Rights' where we – that would've been probably about ninety... these were both I think '95 was the first one and the second one was the year after, '96. And we invited people to come, sort of a similar idea to the AIDS quilt, to come and do squares which was about human rights, but we also had quite a strong AIDS emphasis and then the objective of that was to sew those into quilts which we auctioned off and we gave the proceeds to an AIDS hospice which is called the Rose of Sharon. It was actually for AIDS babies, orphans, at that stage, so that was '96.

So you were inviting people from the community to come in and sew those rather than – they're not artists or...

That's right, yes. You know, artists did come as well but most of our big projects around AIDS have been community as well as artists, instead of just artists, so that was, you know, the other side of it. And what I suppose is just a side story to that, but it's also a story which I always quite enjoy, these little AIDS quilts we auctioned as a – wasn't an AIDS quilt, human rights quilt for AIDS – and I was then invited to come to a sort of quilting organization or something and tell them about this project. One of the things that everybody in the audience was invited to give us a donation and the quilt was sent to Nelson Mandela and I said, "Oh, it's probably in some big room somewhere where he must have millions of things all over but it's nice to know it's somewhere." And then a lady in the audience put up her hand, and she was a friend of the housekeeper of Mandela's at that time and she said, "I've just been to visit my friend and we looked around the house and in his spare room the quilt was on the bed," [laughs] so it wasn't really anything grand, so I think it was just quite interesting, you know, how it showed his real community spirit and sort of dedication to things. But of course, you know, I mean that's also been acknowledged as one of his weaker points, that he never actually addressed the issue at that time which, I mean, who knows why or how now, I'm sure he was just too busy. [Carol is interrupted and talks to someone in background.]

I'll turn this off.

[The interview is momentarily suspended.]

Ok. So we're just talking about your early involvement with HIV related work.

Yes. So that was sort of how, I mean, we slowly started when works came up, collecting them for the collection and so forth and then the biggest event was when that AIDS conference came in 2000 which I think in a way got a lot more public awareness – artistic as well – around the issue and artists not only in Durban but generally in South Africa started making more work around AIDS – some of them because the conference was an opportunity. I don't know if you've been to Cape Town at all?

I have yes; I was just in Cape Town yesterday.

Have you met Marilyn Martin?

Yes, I met her yesterday.

She curated a show which was brought down to the AIDS conference and the works were auctioned and I think the whole show was bought by Brandeis University, Boston.

In Boston? I think they did the auction in Boston but I don't think everything got sold but that was the aim.

I heard recently that Brandeis bought the whole exhibition. I may be wrong but that's what – I just heard this actually about a month ago in America so that seems to be – maybe they just bought what hadn't been sold before. Anyway, so she commissioned people to do it, so that again bought quite a lot of art to the fore and then we had seven different exhibitions here in the gallery because it was centred around Durban. So we did that AIDS ribbon; we also had 'Positive Lives' by Gideon Mendel, photographic – no, it was 'Living Positively' – I can't remember but it was one of those.

'Positive Lives' I think.

And there was an Australian.

In the photographic exhibition?

It's in the book here. No, no, I think he was a curator. Let's just...

Ted Gott?

Kevin – he was HIV positive – we had – yeah, the seven other exhibitions were 'Living Positively', that was the Gideon Mendel one; the Siyazama Project – have you come across Siyazama?

No.

Now that's somebody you really should go and see. Kate Wells, her name is. Have you not heard that? She's done some really interesting shots on AIDS with women and beadwork. I'll show you a piece in a minute. Fiona Kirkwood, you've probably been recommended to see her?

I'm seeing her on Friday. [Postscript: Fiona's interview can be accessed on the Art of AIDS Prevention website: www.aidsart.org]

Ok. She had a work on here called 'Pandemic Patient'. Then there was Jan's 'AIDS Print Portfolio' exhibition, there was 'Postcards from the Edge' which was a children's workshop, community project which was facilitated by – I can't remember who but it was shown here. Then there was the 'South African Memorial Quilt Project' which was whipped together with some of the American quilt and the AIDS 2000 – and we also did an exhibition with some street photographers who work quite closely – we have a group who we just sort of – [pause] I suppose you could say mentor but they sort of – they're older men who've always been – not on the street – taking photos on the street all their lives but we sort of linked up with them and then they come here now regularly and we

give them sort of art appreciation and sometimes funding and a space to exhibit and all that. So they did a project for the conference going around doing AIDS photos. I'd have to dig it out but there was also a – not really a catalogue, more like a broadsheet around Durban so yeah, and the ribbon, so there was a lot of – the gallery was...

That's quite a lot of things to be juggling at the one time.

The whole place was just full of AIDS exhibitions, yeah, and it was opened by Edwin Cameron and at that stage and Nkosi Johnson was here and was really quite a nice thing. But I can't remember what Kevin's name was – I don't know. Anyway, I mean, just because he was Australian – I think he was living in London anyway; he used to commute between the two. He worked for [pause] it was Network Photographers – do you know them at all? And there was another AIDS institution but I can't remember but you know if you want me to follow up on any of this I can get you the contacts, yeah.

What kind of – first of all, who was coming into the gallery at that time and seeing these works and what sort of feedback did you get from those different exhibitions, from the ribbon? Was there any visitors comments left there in the book or...

You know, we're not very good on visitor's comments here unfortunately, we don't sort of make too much of it. We've actually found that they aren't very meaningful because they're not – it's just... But no, there was a lot of incredibly good press and it got onto the BBC. A picture of it was in the London *Guardian* 'cause they were here covering the conference. The idea had never been that it was anything permanent, it was just for the conference but it ended up a lot of people wanted to borrow the banners to make their own little exhibitions for many years after and they made – a lot of them went to Umlazi – the township areas where perhaps a group of people had worked and then they wanted to have something in the community hall so they would borrow our banners, plus sometimes ten others, five others. Each banner was four metres by two, so they're big, you know, very, very big. That was actually how I got involved with UCLA, because they took part of that exhibition to the Fowler Museum and that started a long relationship, you know, six years later I'm still working with them on various projects. I curated an AIDS exhibition for UCLA, a smaller one, and it's led to this big international one. So all in all, you know, the banners they travelled around a lot. They were used and everybody still talks about them. It was a very successful project from that [point of view].

You know, we had a lot of problems fundraising for that because it was just, at that conference when Mbeki came out, well, of course he was in that phase at the conference, but before that he'd come out about this HIV – AIDS isn't caused by HIV, HIV doesn't cause AIDS and so on and so forth. And many sponsors which we approached, because they sort of were doing business with the ANC, they wouldn't give us funding for the project. It was quite an interesting turn around because the City Council, who is ANC, actually ended up funding it because I think we'd just gone so far with the project and advertised it so much that they gave us the money. So there was a strange sort of dichotomy there.

[In terms of making the banners] people were all saying, you know – I wish I had them here in front of me – it was the sort of classic – you obviously know Susan Sontag’s [book] *AIDS and its Metaphors*? Well you could’ve taken these out of that books, you know: “Let’s win the war,” “Let’s fight the enemy”, and it was interesting how all that, you know, she just had it exactly right. And the other thing, too, which was quite interesting was we workshopped that whole thing and we had a lot of volunteers – we purchased all the fabric and the paint and everything – and different volunteers went with representatives, often from our City Health Department, to different venues and it was all done simultaneously because he did it all in a very short period of time.

This is making the banners?

Yes. But so many of them came up with the same type of language and we also expected more pictures as such, we didn’t sort of direct that it had to be text and it was extremely text based which I think is quite interesting in terms of representation of AIDS or illness or whatever, that people actually don’t know how to represent it and it seems like words are a stronger medium. Which gets back to your, you know, the visual literacy issue as well.

So these were people in the community working with health educators or people from public health, and an artist?

Yes.

Ok. So they workshopped the ideas that health people gave them – knowledge about AIDS?

Yes, this is it, that’s right.

So how many people in each team were there?

Well, the participants – each banner was at least ten people working on it because you know, it was probably – four metres is probably about three quarters of that wall and about halfway so it’s almost like that top part, but yeah, so it took a lot of people working. So there were probably about ten people per banner but then there were generally at least one or two facilitators which we organised. Then, because we’re linked with the City Health, you know we’re part of the municipal structure, there was generally a City Health representative or one of the AIDS, you know, there’s Sinikithemba, there’s various AIDS organizations so we drew in volunteers from there as well because it wasn’t about just going to paint, it was about actually getting the education across.

That’s an interesting relationship you’ve got with City Health and it wouldn’t – it would be quite unique I think – not many galleries would be associated in a municipal structure.

We’re actually doing another project with them but we haven’t concretised it yet – I actually took the nurse to a workshop that brings organisation round a few weeks ago

and we were both sort of trying to work on something now to get it – ‘cause there’s an enormous amount of HIV positive employees here in the municipality.

And they understand the potential to use art to you know, convey messages and to you know, raise awareness?

Yes, it’s interesting, yes. Some do, some don’t, but generally you know, we’ve met with cooperation.



Women from the Siyazama Project display their dolls.

Tell me about the exhibition – the smaller one that you did at the Fowler Gallery. Did you show that here first or that was just going to America?

Well, part of it was from the exhibition which – the Siyazama Project – in fact I’ve got a work I can show you. [Walks away to find something] Just to give you an idea. This is the person, Kate Wells. I really think if you’ve got time you really should see her because her project’s really interesting. This is the sort of thing they do, but many of them are little – we’ve got a couple out in the gallery as well. [Walks back] But this is ‘AIDS orphans’; the women make these little dolls – but each tableaux – some of them are quite powerful – I can show you as we walk out as well. They’re often quite didactic – and again, rather she tells you than I do but she had a whole exhibition of beadwork made by this particular group who she workshops with and has done since about ‘99 I think. And they tell a very interesting story and one of the people from the Fowler saw that and he’d also seen our banners so you know, he asked me to put together – particularly interested in the beadwork and the banner and then what I did was I curated – they have a very good collection at the Fowler of old Zulu beadwork as well – beadwork more in terms of traditional beadwork. So I curated it using their collection as the art historical reference to how the beadwork had changed and you know, bought the works from here to there and we, they’ve got like – do you know the UCLA campus at all?

No.

They've got a gallery that's round a sort of atrium thing so there's this whole walls so we put up about twenty of those banners from here around there as well, so it's sort of like a big picture of City Hall with the banner and you know, a few other objects but that was the main thing was the beadwork and the banners.

Have you had an involvement with David Gere?

Yes, he's part of the exhibition. He's one of the main leaders of this particular exhibition. Do you know him?

Oh, I know of him. I know he did some things in – I think he was in India for about six months.

Yes, he's in India frequently, yes, that's right, yes. He's sort of one of my main – he's not the person who originally asked me to Fowler but we've all linked up on this particular exhibition. It's actually David's brainchild, this exhibition which we're doing now.

And what else did you have in that exhibition? We've had the beadwork – can you remember some of the artists who were...?

It was a small exhibition, it wasn't a big one. The beadwork was mainly the artists – it was very much a community exhibition so it wasn't really about any major artists or any sophisticated paintings or anything. That exhibition had a very particular community feel, so it was mainly the group of people from here. There's a sort of specific group of better bead-makers in that group who work with and the banners which were community projects as well, and so their older Zulu beadwork as well, so those were really – there were no artists as such.

Ok. Is there – I mean, in the Australian context there's a lot of influence from the American art of the 1980s, particularly ACT-UP, their graphic style influenced Australian AIDS activists and Australian AIDS-related artists who were producing work. Is that evident in South Africa or South Africans seem very much concerned with their own problems, their own epidemic?

I don't think there's a very big influence here at all, and especially in the AIDS work, you know, because work, particularly now with this show we're looking at a lot of American artists from the '80s because that's when most – and it's very, very different from the South African expressions. It's been actually quite interesting how different it is. And you can see you're talking about two different types of epidemic, because the American one was mainly, you know, about homosexuality and here it's actually not an issue – very, very few representations are. Most of the artistic ones are heterosexual in nature. And it's about memory and, you know, in a certain way gentler maybe? It's not as – which is quite strange – but that strong anger which came out in the sort of ACT-UP and all that isn't as evident in the art here. It is more accepting: there's more of an acceptance of death in South Africa, unfortunately.

There is, but there's also a situation where artists – particularly if they were involved in the apartheid struggle – are in the situation where they don't want to be too critical now of the government that's replaced it and Nelson Mandela, like you said, Mandela dropped the ball on AIDS when he was President but he did a lot of great things as well and his legacy is so powerful that you don't want to chip away at him, whereas American artists in the 1980s were enraged by Ronald Reagan and most of their art was directed against that.

Yes, I think it is, it's very much that political situation as well because you, you know, their government has done so much, you can't really – it's a very difficult situation, it's very complicated, I think.

The exhibition that you're planning, is that going to be shown here or the United States? Are you planning to tour it to other places as well?

The plan – but it all depends on funding, of course – David Gere is doing most of the fundraising and it's not going too well at the moment [laughs] but he's confident it will. The plan is that it opens – I think it will definitely open at the Fowler but it's now, it's pushed forward – what are we, 2006, 2007? It's probably going to be either December 2007 or January 2008 at the Fowler Museum, but we're already arranging funds and loans and all that from here, so it is going to happen. The original plan was to then take it to India and Brazil because those are countries being represented – well, they're having quite a problem getting representation from those countries – and it would come to a couple of venues in South Africa and conclude hopefully in the National Gallery, maybe Grahamstown. I'd secured all the South African venues, 'cause it was going to happen early next year, but unfortunately it's [delayed] another year so I've had to sort of change the whole plan again. But it will definitely – I would say almost definitely South Africa and America, but the others are a little bit in abeyance at the moment, yeah.

And when it, say when it comes to South Africa, will you bring more work, more South African work into it rather than because it obviously can't travel everywhere?

Yes. There's quite a lot of South African work but, as you say, there's a space limitation if you're showing four countries so we will definitely bring more South African work. It will probably be a different exhibition in each country; we've sort of accepted that. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing I don't know, but that's what it is.

Tell me about who you think is doing really vital work in South Africa at the moment? Whose work is maybe the most effective or affecting and successful?

You know, I think really and truly the community projects are the most important projects, as they would be, and I do think the Siyazama Project is very important because it's a whole story and you know, as I say I would tell it to you but I think you must see her [Kate Wells] and rather hear it from the horse's mouth because it's a very, very interesting process and very fascinating process. I think Jan's work is important, I think his print portfolios, you know, bearing in mind my reservations about the billboard it's not in any you know, I think it's getting the message out and because of its sort of portability and prints are always a more democratic medium. And you know

there are so many little projects that are just – you know whether one puts them under fine art – again there’s a really interesting project which I only came across a couple of weeks ago and I want to follow up, it’s more of an economic generation thing for HIV positive women but again using craft and beadwork. Bren would be able to put you in touch with that person. It’s at Hillcrest, and it’s a woman...

In Durban?

Yes. Just ask Bren. Tell him I told you because he knows the project; it’s actually linked to the Methodist Church I think, but it’s not actually a Church project.

Sounds a little bit like what Kim Berman’s doing in Jo’burg as well where they’re getting the Paper Prayers and they go out to women who bead and embroider and then they sell those works and...

Yes, that’s right, yes. And I think those are really interesting because not only that, you know, these women are using this to educate their own community by showing them objects to talk about things which they can’t articulate. So I think that’s where it’s really important, that educational component. Because there’s a big taboo in Zulu culture about talking about sex through the generations sort of thing and it’s very difficult for the mothers to explain to the daughters, and the sons you know, all these things, and making these little objects and little sculptures they’re used as teaching tools which you know, is great. And then you know, if you’re looking at the sort of major artists, phew, there’s so many. Brenton Maart, I don’t know if you know his work?

Brenton Maart?

Yes. He’s a Johannesburg artist; he’s doing really interesting work. He works more on the gay issues – very, very strong work that. Diane Victor. Is it Churchill Madikida? We bought that coffin – do you know that coffin?

Yeah, from ‘Status’?

We bought that for our permanent collection but it’s stuck in Dakar and I’m hoping we’re going to get it back. [Laughs] That’s very, very problematic. Have you seen the – well obviously you’ve seen it?

I went to – I talked to Churchill the other day and most of that, what was installed when it was first shown, when it was at Michael Stevenson anyway, it’s all been scattered around now. So he showed me through the films that were a part...

The coffin installation is I think really powerful, you know. Now you see, they weren’t interested in showing that on the show in America; they didn’t think it was an important piece. So that would definitely be in the show here and it won’t be there and they’ve also got a bit of a thing about coffins there, so it’s difficult you know. [Laughs]

Well, again, I mean the American understanding of the epidemic now is that it’s a chronic illness, it’s something you live with, you just take your meds and then you go on and that – there was a whole thing about living with AIDS, dying with AIDS,

fighters that they had in the late '80s and early '90s so I think there's still residue there that people won't – are not prepared to admit that people can die of AIDS and in other countries outside of America and Australia people do, you know.

Well, you know, as I said, I had this fellowship at Emory University and I had to give a few public talks and, you know, centred around these things and various artists and you know, Churchill and the coffins was one of them and you know, I was also challenged by somebody really bright – we actually ended up sort of meeting for coffee and thrashing it through because there's only so much you can say at a conference – but exactly what you're saying that, you know, through showing these images we're projecting the sort of negative aspect and it's not like that. And this person was somebody who turned out, you know, he really – he's a very, very bright guy – art historian – there who'd actually been part of ACT-UP as well and you know, they actually aren't aware until I – I just said this is a bit much to answer now, we made it a quick thing and then let's go for coffee – and it's interesting though because people aren't aware, even people who are very well informed, exactly what the – and this whole fear of death and dead bodies and coffins – African funerals are very different here, you know, it's all very – you look at a body, you don't shy away from it, so it's...

Did you walk through the installation that Churchill had?

Mmm.



Churchill Madikida, *Status*, installation at Documenta 12, 2007.

What emotions did it evoke in you, if you can remember?

Well, I went there – I went to the exhibition without any intentions of buying the works, it was really just to see if I could select anything maybe for the LA show and I found that coffin piece so immensely powerful and this was sort of before he became – it was just as he was hitting, you know, and I straight away said, “We’ve got to have this for our collection, it’s such a powerful work.” It has been criticised. The criticisms I’ve heard are from people who’ve only seen the illustration of the work – it is an installation and as you know any installation you have to experience it – it’s not a photographic thing. And

it was extremely moving; you actually, you know, you really felt... And another criticism which I had about that was that there was no anger [that is, the artist wasn't angry or provoke sufficient anger in the audience] but, in fact, again I disagree with that because the mere fact that this was his sister and the sister's baby and they died because they didn't have access to treatment – it is anger. You know, he's saying, "This shouldn't have happened," you know, this is how it is. And in the sacredness of that space – I found it a very profound work. Not everybody did, I have to say. It's been quite an interesting piece to track over the last year or so. I think his work is very strong, but that's not everybody's opinion on it. People see it also as being opportunistic which I don't agree with at all, saying that he's using his own personal thing to...

That was a criticism that was levelled at Diane's smoke portraits as well; that she went into, I think, an AIDS hospice, and that's the way she found subjects. And speaking to her, she was very much aware of that critique as well and said that was a tension involved and if that's the only thing that comes out of that work, that people are now thinking about the ethics of treating people with AIDS as subjects – how they participate in their own representations – she sees that as a positive thing. I think the work does a lot more than that, but... And that's a debate they've also had in Australia and definitely in America – the idea of people with AIDS being passive subjects rather than active participants in their own, you know, their own making.

Absolutely, yes, that's right. It's always difficult. The process of art is difficult like that isn't it; you are objectifying a situation really but otherwise how do you do it? Do you ignore it?

Can you think of any instances where your perception of the epidemic has been changed by a work of art about AIDS, either your own responsibilities within the epidemic or which has helped you vent your own frustration or sense of loss or maybe sense of grief as well? I mean, experiencing art can be a bit of a cathartic process. Can you think of a work that you've experienced that's done that, either in South Africa or overseas?

Interesting question because [laughs] I haven't sort of really thought about it or been asked it. You know, I think maybe – have you seen Pieter Hugo's pictures of bodies and coffins? Do you know Pieter Hugo?

Yes, it rings a bell. I've seen so much art in the last couple of weeks.

Michael Stevenson Gallery had them?

I don't immediately recall.

He took pictures – he took portraits – photographs – of corpses and coffins and I'm using that word portraits quite carefully because they were taken from above, they you know, so the picture was of a head and they were dramatically lit and they were treated in the same way as if they were taking a portrait of you and they were clearly dead, but at the same time, they were also – I found them very beautiful and I think – when I think of all the artworks I've worked with and seen, I think those are the ones that have had the

most resonance with me in terms of also raising a lot of questions and a lot of issues about our taboos about death and so forth and they were – I think it’s also that – well, I think it’s the fact of making an enduring portrait of a dead body that is, I think is very unusual and it’s also very moving and it’s very – what’s the word? I can’t think of the word – not spiritual, respectful, it’s – I can’t think of the word – sacred? I don’t know, something about catching that moment of death and keeping that as an enduring memory and not looking at horror. So on the one hand it’s a horrific image because it’s a person who’s died young and who shouldn’t have died and you know that, and – I can’t really describe it, but it’s a sort of transference between – I suppose it’s that beauty, horror, death, life and the only sort of the way, when you look at that, the only indication that it’s dead is there’s this sort of, it can’t be a person sleeping because there’s something that’s not in the eyes – very hard to articulate. And, again, it’s been very controversial; the Americans didn’t even want to look at it, they thought it was extremely intrusive and all that, but Hugo did this in a very respectful manner. He went with somebody from TAC [activist group Treatment Action Campaign] who fully approved of the project and supported it. They negotiated with the family of the bereaved, and he started the series by taking [photographs of] the empty rooms where the people had died called ‘The Bereaved’, and then it ended up with the corpses – he led himself on to that. And I just think that the issues of death, living, you know, it’s a very – again, it’s not easy to even say why it’s affected me but I think if I look, you know, if that question you asked me, what work has maybe stayed with me the most, what I’ve talked about and thought about the most it’s those works. Let me just see if I’ve got them.
[Pause while Carol looks at computer]



Pieter Hugo, *Nyameka J. Matiyayna* from *The Bereaved* series, 2005.

Oh yes. It's called 'The Bereaved'.

But can you see what I mean? How they are sort of – it's that – what is that? It's a very – what is that sort of saying – it's horror and beauty or the – I don't know, it's something.

The macabre springs to mind.

[Laughs] I don't know. And they're big – blown up big. And you know, just the beauty of the folds around the face and the – there's such a sort of rest – and again, passiveness, if there's such a word.

They do look so young.

Yeah. [Pause] And I think it sort of hits you, they shouldn't have died and, you know, you may be beautiful in death but you shouldn't be dead and, you know, it's all these sort of contradictory things I suppose. So I think, I don't know, I suppose it's not very well articulated but that's my sort of strongest work I would say.

Can you think of anything else that has moved you? It doesn't have to be in the art world, it can be a film or a cultural product that represents AIDS in some way – writing, theatre?

[Pause] Many years ago I saw Derek Jarman's *Blue*; have you ever seen that? I found that pretty powerful as well! [Laughs] I think maybe that would be my iconic... [Pause] That absence of sight really, just that blue.

It's amazing for a film which didn't...

I tried to get it you know...

You can't get it.

They put it on to, I believe they put it on to a CD, the sound, but that's not the point! And they actually never, because – I read somewhere, why make a DVD that's blue, you know? You can save that process.

I mean it would a different impact than if you're looking at a small screen as opposed to a really big screen and it's just a blue expanse and you hear the sound.

No, but I still think you could – especially nowadays, you know, there's so many ways of projecting these things or whatever.

Yeah, and it's sort of like – so many people will cite that as a really important point in the culture of AIDS and yet it never went to a mainstream cinema, you had to see it at a film...

Film festival, I saw it at a film festival.

...maybe at a film festival, and it's not the DVD or video. Ok, well, that's all I'm going to ask you because I've taken up enough of your time already.

When do you intend to – don't ask me the same question! [Laughs]

No, this is – my South African foray is really just beginning. Most of my work so far has been on Australia and the United States and this project is still, you know, funding contingent as well.

Oh gosh, yes. It keeps all of us back, doesn't it?

Yeah. But I mean, I'm interested; we had a very large AIDS art exhibition in 1994/95 at the National Gallery of Australia.

I think I've seen that catalogue; what was it called?

'Art in the Age of AIDS'. It's a black sort of catalogue with a red flower fold design.

Yes, 'Don't Leave...

Yeah, 'Don't Leave Me This Way', yeah, which was incredibly important. 140,000 went through the exhibition.

Good heavens!

Yeah. And it was at the National Gallery, it got \$250,000 of Health Department funding – not culture funding but, you know, health money. But no African art then, you know, and that was...

Sure, but there wasn't much being made.

There wasn't much around, yeah I know.

I don't know if there was anything being made then. It wasn't an issue here then. Not that many people knew.

So, I mean, it would be great to explore the possibility, you know, of bringing the exhibition that you're putting together to Australia because there is new work that's happened in Australia in the last ten years and I think it would be really interesting to revisit an AIDS art exhibition in a big gallery in Australia, you know, ten or fifteen years afterwards just to see...

Yeah, that would be great. Well, you know, if the money comes maybe it could be considered but it's – as you know it's just so expensive to travel these big works or whatever.

Oh well, maybe it's a point of, you know, talking to the galleries we have in Australia and getting them to get some money together.

Well, sure. And again, one could always tailor something that's perhaps not quite so big. I don't know how big it's going to be but, you know, there are ways of cutting down. Because the one for Fowler – it was little, it was small and it was terribly effective. When they did a survey at the end of the year – and Fowler do really good shows – that was the most popular, the most visited show of the year there in the Fowler Museum which was quite amazing you know, 'cause it really was a very low budget, in fact, I just went across with a, you know, my – the boxes sort of thing, [laughs] so we didn't even freight them across so it was all just...

Put it in your hand luggage.

Yeah, that's right!

Ok, then, I'll just turn this off.

[End of interview]

If citing this interview please use the following:

Carol Brown interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Durban, 18 July 2006, *The Art of AIDS Prevention*, <http://www.aidsart.org/#!vstc1=brown>; accessed <insert date>