

Diane Victor interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Johannesburg, South Africa, 14 July 2006

This is a complete and 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: this is an interview with Diane Victor on the 14th of July 2006 and we're at the Goodman Art Gallery in Melville in Johannesburg. Is your name pronounced Di-anne, or De-anne?

Diane Victor: Di-anne, yeah, that's correct.

I'm going to start off with a really broad question which has nothing to do with art at all but has a lot to do with AIDS in South Africa. As someone living here, how do you think you might be able to explain the incredibly high rates of infection – people infected with HIV here – and how the country's really been unable to stem the flow, so to speak?

God, that's a multi-levelled question and it is a massive question as well. A lot of the problem has to do – I suppose it's difficult to say – is with lack of information. I know that our government is trying now to educate people, trying to get information out there, but it's a cultural issue, certainly within the, sort of, black peoples of the country to, not necessarily use condoms, but have quite an issue with the idea of protective sex and that – things are changing now but it's almost too late. It's a horrendous position to hold, but it's very late down the way. So it had to do with initially refusing, it was very much often a male, patriarchal opinion that "I'm not going to use a condom, that's against my belief system" and, you know, wanting to know the power of the sperm or whatever it is, and I think that's where a lot of the problems came in. Also, our government hasn't done a particularly brilliant job and our Minister of Health has said some bizarre things which I'm sure you're aware of which everyone just throws their hands up in horror and just thinks, "Oh God, what next?"

What's a couple of examples of crazy things she's, sort of, said?

I'm just trying to think back to news reports that she was claiming...I mean, we've had our President two or three years ago said HIV wasn't – I might get my terminology wrong because I'm tired – AIDS is not necessarily HIV based. It made a statement, I mean, it went across the world in seconds, just the kind of repercussions and people just thought "Oh my God". Our Minister of Health has said at various points that AIDS can be stemmed through healthy eating; obviously healthy lifestyle improves your immunity system and improves your chances of survival, but the misbelief that comes with that is quite scary in a population, because of the previous system and the lack of education that went out there, there's a lot of superstition and traditional beliefs that still hold through and it's trying to overcome and educate that's where I think the previous government and this government has failed. They haven't managed to get the information out there fast enough and the infection rate is still ridiculous, it's, I mean, what the stats that you get are probably nothing in comparison to what's actually

happening. It's literally knowing that people, and watching the funeral processions, I mean, I stay out in the rural area about 30, 40 kms north of here on a fairly main road and there's a big graveyard about 10 kms down that road and on Saturdays and Sundays driving out of the gate you literally see funeral processions every weekend, you know someone who is going to a funeral every weekend. Yeah, but I think a lot of it's – the problem is education.

What about some of those education campaigns they've got going at the moment? Just moving around the city in the last two or three days I've seen a lot of billboards, for example...

'Love Life', yes, they've done a very nice, fairly hard-hitting campaign trying to get to the youth, trying to actually get it across; I think they are trying really intently but a lot of it's got to do with the rural population which doesn't have access to that, yeah. And that's where your problem is, sort of.

As a visual person, as you satisfied with the kind of images they're showing, say, on those billboards and I imagine there's television commercials as well?

I don't think they're hardcore enough, actually don't, I honestly don't. That's pretty much the position that I come from generally, that the power of images, that you've got to go in there, and I know shock has its limits and after a while people do tend to back off and it loses its effect but I honestly feel when you've got loss of life at such a high rate you can't afford to keep, you know, gloves on, you've actually got to go out with hard-hitting images.

And by hard-hitting you mean more sexually explicit images or just images of greater destruction, devastation, death and...?

There's some stunning photographic essays done on people in final stages of infection, just really poignant, powerful images, I'm not talking about mass graves, but things that would stop people in the traffic. I mean, we've got really hectic transport problems in this country, you spend a fair percentage of your life sitting in the car, and you get these billboards advertising, God, it can be all number of cell phone providers, replacing those images with static images of this is what happens, not grave images but, you know, two or three weeks away from terminal, images like that. I really, but honestly like I say, really believe in the power of an image to literally horrify your viewer, yeah.

Are there some photographers you've got in mind who've done that sort of work?

What I was relating to specifically was this show "Open Ends" for which the smoke portraits were made, was an exchange show with a group of German artists who came over, was in November/December 2004, they came over, and one of the German photographers – I can get you a catalogue, I've got them here – came and did a very interesting photo essay going to a lot of the HIV clinics and going out to hospitals and actually doing photography of guys in, sort of, terminal cases, and they were poignant, beautiful photographs. I mean, I'm really bad with names, I apologise and I'm tired and I'm stressing out, but when you've seen the images, you've seen them and they're heart wrenching.

I think there's two photographers here, David Goldblatt does some photographs...

Yeah, he's done some powerful, yeah.

And Gideon Mendel, I think he lives in the UK now though, but I've seen some of his work. And Sue Williamson as well.

Yes, Sue. Have you spoken with Churchill Madikida?

I'm meeting with him tomorrow, actually.

You're going to see Churchill? Good. Not a photographer, but I mean his show down at Michael Stevenson was incredibly powerful. But that's the problem, that these images tend to stay within galleries, I mean, that's where the billboard project came in, attempting to – I honestly believe we've got the powerful images – they should go from the gallery-confined art out into the public spaces out onto and I really feel onto road areas because that's where people see it. You've got a captive audience and, yeah.



Churchill Madikida, installation of *Status* (2005)

Good. [Pause] I suppose, just, sort of, speaking about the world that you're, sort of, circulating in the art world, do you know many artists who are infected with HIV or were identifying as HIV positive, or any artists who've died of AIDS?

Not off hand. Actually, I mean, that's quite an amazing thing to say. I know a lot of artists who are working with the issues and people whose partners have died but not somebody close in the art world who actually has died from HIV. My connection with it tends to be through – there's a man who works for me, as I say, I stay on a small holding and I keep horses – through his family, through the people he knows. Another guy who came and stayed with me two or three years ago who committed suicide – he was HIV positive – committed suicide trying to get the insurance and his wife and child were dead six months afterwards so his entire family were dead; he shot himself, he was a security guard and he needed a place to stay and I offered the place where I was and he stayed there for two years, and six months the entire family was just, yeah. So it's things like that, not through the art world, it's more through the broader populous of people that you deal with on a daily basis. We have a fairly small little art world, we do; I don't think it's as extensive as a lot of other countries 'cause there hasn't been the financial support for the visual arts. It's sort of a little survival group, yeah.

Would they, do you think, I mean, I know just being here for a couple of days there's a lot of stigma about HIV and there's still a lot of silence about it and that was part of the 'Break the Silence' billboard project; would there be a chance there are HIV positive artists but they're not willing to disclose or they're even – they don't want to be tested because of that, sort of, threat of discrimination?

I think there's a lot of people who don't want to be tested. I mean, we do have quite a hectic lifestyle here, not as hectic as possibly you've been told, and a lot of people's attitude is you live for now and "Hey, you deal with it when you deal with it". And the attitude of just taking chances on sexual level is just still out there and it's horrific, people just go in there and it's like, "Hey" it's like Russian roulette. Because life is so, I mean, our death rates on road tolls and crime is pretty prolific as well so people just go out there and, yeah, chance it. So possibly there are, yeah, but not that I'm aware of.

I mean, we know from HIV studies in the United States and in Australia where infection rates are much lower, but in the communities where it's prevalent, such as the gay communities in urban centres, that those people who think – who can't see an end to the epidemic and who've lost a lot of people and loved ones, they develop a kind of fatalism about it that, "Well, I'll probably get infected anyway so..."

So what the hell, yeah.

"...what the hell" and yeah. Do you think art might even be able to challenge that mindset and promote some kind of hope that the epidemic can be beaten and does it have a role to play in that?

I'm an unfortunate idealist, I wouldn't be in this industry if I wasn't. I actually do, the power of images in raising awareness and raising awareness, yes, I honestly do. And I think things are improving, it's just a matter of – it's just this time delay in getting from the core out to the rest of the population and that's where the frustration comes into it, that it hasn't occurred yet. But I do, that idealism is there on everything. I mean, a lot of the images which you're probably not aware of that I make, over and above, that relates to HIV, deal with a lot of the crime and the violence in this country. The baby rape

situation which is something quite horrific, from various readings that I've done, listened to reports, is often initiated through cultural myth that sex with a virgin cures HIV and obviously the younger the virgin, the greater the power therefore if you're looking at a 2 month child, it almost guarantees and I mean, those are images that I've worked with, putting them out there, upsetting people, getting stuff banned, getting thrown out of places desperately, yeah, needing, believing that an image going and upsetting people, causing outrage, does so much more – actually is an effective thing, yeah.

It's interesting you said that, trying to get images shown and not being able to sometimes, because in doing some research and Googling your name on the internet and trying to find out things about you, you have lots of people, when writing about your work, talk about you being uncompromising, confronting, raw images of open wounds of the psyche, those kind of things and yet the images that are on the web are a lot more benign than that and so there's some kind of gate-keeping going on because it's the galleries, I suppose, and the institutions that are putting those images on there.

The ones that are most offensive tend to stay at home because people don't buy them they just, yeah, they back off and they close down, yeah.

You might have to, if you get a chance, to do some images for me and maybe...

I can just send you images.

That would be really good.

As I said, when my life returns to normal, a month's time exactly – after the show there's another deadline – I can just get together a whole package of stuff. There's a series of etchings I did, 'Disasters of Peace' which is an ongoing series based on Goya's 'Disasters of War' which is now, I think I'm on about the fiftieth plate, just working with basic information that comes through on the news or through what you hear from people, newspapers, radio and then just working with this, using the same format that he did, these disastrous images, these absolutely violent, horrendous acts that occur in our country, just documenting them is ongoing – which for me is an incredibly necessary thing, I don't live comfortably in my own skin if I don't.

Why do you do that for? Why do you, sort of, feel the need to immediately respond to those things that you're reading or...?

I have to. I've tried to suss this out in my head before; it's almost a kind of cathartic – I need to – it's processing. When you produce an image it works it out of your system, it's a kind of self-therapy; I literally work it out of my system. Because otherwise when it happens it short circuits and it comes back and it comes back, you'll pick up a paper, you'll read a really horrendous act, something that happens – there was that woman who had her face burnt off with a clothing iron, the guys took three days to torture her – and it – I can't clear it out of my psyche, well, not that it ever goes until I actually work it through.

[A man comes in with a jacket for Diane and offers tea and coffee]

Yeah, so it's built into me, it's like it rubs, it's almost like a blister. Things really – I've got to process them.

And where have they been shown, those...?

That series, I mean, well, that specific series are shown here at Goodman and down in Cape Town. They were bought by the Museum of Modern Art in New York which is really nice, as soon as I got art over there. The place it caused a great outrage, I teach part-time at Pretoria University and the legal department accessed a series, a copy of the set, they were put up in the Law Department and absolute outrage from the staff members who complained that these images were too offensive. This is a Law Department, people – specifically images which deal with child abuse and baby rape, those are the ones that seem to hit home the hardest, which is very interesting, because the people who cry the loudest, are always – one wonders what the indignation initiates from. It went to the Senate and the Council and in the end the images had to be removed and they're locked away downstairs and you can apply to see them. And they're polite! They're not actually – I don't make, I've learnt from experience, I think hopefully I've tempered myself with a bit of age, previously the images I've made tend to, sort of, slap people from two metres and I've found your viewer would look and you'd get that sort of roller door effect, they're just like "Oh my God, what is this?" and I've lost the effect of a visual communicator. You disgusted them or horrified them too much and they backed off because obviously newspaper and TV, one is constantly bombarded with images of violence and horror and people tend to, on a self-preservation level, tend to kind of switch off. So these 'Disasters' as far as I'm concerned are not horrific images, not at all, they deal with horror but the actual drawings themselves, you've probably seen some of them, I mean, they're probably on the internet, they're actually quite polite. But this Law Department just about – and then the papers got hold of it which was great and made a field day out of it because it was the legal department of a university...

Yes, of all places.

And it was the staff, the staff became totally polarised and the one part refused to have these – I can't remember the term, some Afrikaans term, my Afrikaans is not great – absolute horrific insults to our, you know, our cultural psyches and for God's sake, they're lawyers! They're people who should be going out and dealing with, yeah. And that's when I feel the images have succeeded, that's when one's happy and you think – it's not that some gallery buys them and they stay within, you know, preaching to the converted, it's going out into the public and causing upset, yeah.

Tell me a little bit about the smoke portrait series then. Where did the stimulus come for doing those images? I know we just talked a bit about that before, but just for the purposes of the tape as well, and what were you hoping to achieve by that series?

I was down teaching in Grahamstown which is East Cape, on a six month stint down there. It was one of those synchronicity things; I had been invited to do work on this 'Open Ends' exchange program with Germany and South Africa and it was these German

artists, which for me was also slightly problematic, these European artists coming out to make comments on AIDS in Africa. It was a little bit of a difficult position and we do have a little bit of resentment here, you know, the great cultural elite coming out to inform us how to run our programs. And also I find making work dealing with HIV incredibly difficult. I mean, someone like Sue has researched it, Sue Williamson, and produced some incredibly powerful work and one feels somewhat, not redundant, but how does one produce an image that's new, that's actually going to have an effect on your viewer? And I was in a bit of a quandary stuck down in the middle of nowhere teaching and it was an exercise doing the students, trying to get them to work with new media in drawing, trying to show some students how to draw with candle, realising that the medium could produce incredibly fragile and vulnerable images. It's really easy to draw with once you get the hang of it. If I hadn't been involved in that project and the deadline – I tend to be someone who's quite deadline driven - was due in about a month and I had to drive back up to Jo'burg and deliver the work, so the pressure was to produce something and I was isolated in the middle of nowhere, the medium arrived at the right time. Just up from where I was teaching is the St Raphael Centre, which is a HIV Community Centre that is basically a day clinic. The East Cape is an incredibly, possibly of all our provinces, one of the most poverty-struck. Poverty down there – Jo'burg is luxury. It's, yeah, there's no work, there's a very low employment rate, there's very high HIV infection rate and I'd obviously been past that clinic a couple of times and there were some nuns working there and I'd spoken to them and I just – it was a synchronicity thing. It's often the way I work – I tend to be rather intuitive in my work process, rather than pre-planning something one tends to follow, yeah, a rough line and it was a synchronicity of having the medium and the project appear at the right time.

And they were conducive, you coming in and sketching and...

What I did is I actually, because – I work from photos – because the medium itself, well, it's not something you can do because if there's any wind, there's any movement, the candle moves, you can't control your smoke – you're literally catching smoke, that's all you're doing. So what I did was I went and explained the project – I went into the clinic randomly one day and explained the project – and there was probably about sixty guys in the day clinic coming in in various states – I explained, spoke to the guys who were running it, explained the project, asked if anyone would like to be involved in it, I wanted to come and take photos and then obviously in exchange I would return the photos to them, so it was a way of getting photos and the water images that I did to show them and just from a random show of hands, those people who were there on that day, which was probably about the 10th of November in 2004, said yes they were interested, took the photos – it was just one of these things, it sort of roller-balled – took the images, went in, made the portraits – I did about 36 or 40 portraits based on that – and then went back afterwards, obviously with photos of the smoke drawings, the actual drawings themselves just don't transit very well, and they guys were, I must admit, not deeply impressed with my drawings, which is fine, [Paul laughs] because it's very difficult to get an accurate likeness. They were very happy with photos, they were very chuffed getting their photos back; the smoke drawings, they kind of thought I had a really good photo, what the hell I was doing wasting my time trying to catch candle smoke. Yeah, that was pretty much the process. I've been in contact with the guys at Cotlands – Cotlands is a hospice here in Gauteng that works with HIV children, terminal children – who are always trying to raise money and things like that and it's another

project I want to do in the future, going in and just doing a series of portraits of the babies – they don't normally last more than two years, they've got about a two year life span – and just doing – because for me it's the transience of the medium, the fact that you're catching smoke, the fact that the medium itself is so vulnerable to any contact, any physical contact with it destroys it, and that would be the next part of the project that I would want to do, just these little floating heads, because that's what it is, little floating people that just, kind of, evaporate



Diane Victor, from *Smoke Portraits* (2005)

There was also, I think, four full-sized portraits.

That was at Michael Stevenson Gallery; again, a lot of my ideas are based on demand. I had the space allocated to me and I was going to show the series of portraits, felt that formally I required temperance and wanted to work with burning people, the idea of people because the mark making on the large figures does become very burnt, they're literally up in flames, and just worked with people that I knew, not all of them were HIV positive, people who I knew were prepared to model for me, the idea of burning people, literally burning issues. Part of the work that's coming up at the Goodman Gallery next week – in fact, I must give you an invite so you can look at it because part of the image is on the cover, was another series that I did, I mean, I've been working this for a while – working with missing children sitting on an internet system and on the South African police force there's a vast number of missing kids out there. Just taking images, any child missing for more than two months, which is quite a scary – after two months

obviously your chances of return are fairly low, and then doing portraits of them and then setting them off against a series of drawings of stain-guards working with the Christian, Christ, the Virgin Mary and God and drawing them in stains, the kind of stains you get on your roof when the ceiling leaks, and permeating, literally, yeah, these stained impotent gods kind of come through. It was to set up the tension between the missing children, the dead, those that hadn't been looked after and a religious system or a belief system that's failed them. So for Michael Stevenson it was an attempt to set up the figures, I felt I needed formally full figures of these people that burn, kind of burning figures for the – to play off against the heads.

You might be interested to know about a woman in Australia, who about five or six years ago I interviewed her, and she worked with people with AIDS as outpatients at Saint Vincent's Hospital which is our big AIDS hospital in Sydney, she goes in and takes Polaroid shots of them and generally, like, there'll be six or eight Polaroid shots of their whole face or their bodies and she does them up close, takes them to a computer, scans them, gets them enlarged, and then, sort of, patches them together, not so that – sometimes their eyes are much larger than their heads and things like that – paints over the top of them with gold leaf and brings out the, sort of, paints over the top to bring out features and things like that, and then covers them in shellac, which is a furniture polish.

Ok, so they become almost like an icon.

That's what she works with.

And wood so they become – that's nice.

And she actually, when she takes the Polaroids, she talks to them and a lot of them were talking about – and they were gay men – and a lot of them were outside religious tradition, the Church had failed them in terms of their sexuality, but they wanted to know, they wanted to know something about the afterlife. They were frightened about what was going to happen once they died and she was creating, sort of, icons for them and at least trying to evoke that kind of spiritual yearning of where they were going, but the interesting thing is once you put the shellac over the top of the images and then she puts them in frames, the shellac over time is eating away the image and they're dissolving, which is...

They're corrosive and literally getting corroded away.

That's right, and that's the resonance with your work and...

It's an impermanent process, impermanent medium, yeah.

And you work from photographs and you're doing portraits as well, so... Her name is Marie Azzopardi, I should write it down.

Write it down and I'll search her on the net, 'cause I was actually in Sydney last year, of all places, I went travelling last year and I will be back at some time in the future.

Well, she's someone to look up.

Yeah.

When you've shown the smoke portraits, what kind of feedback have you received both maybe from critics but also if you have received this kind of feedback from the people who've actually seen the portraits?

The people who the portraits were of? Or just general people coming in?

No, just general people, the general public, I mean, does what you're saying about HIV and about the humanity, is that resonating with them? Are they becoming affected by that or are they just looking at it as a technical exercise?

I'm afraid that the majority of people – I honestly am not that confident that the images are that hard-hitting. Within the art world per se, people are – I mean, they do have a lot of problems and I'm very conscious of the fact that it's exploitative, I go out there and work with the other and take images and produce pictures – it is a very problematic thing for me. I was very conscious of that, but at some point you just have to make a decision and go with it, otherwise you can think yourself into a corner and you don't do anything. I mean, there was some fairly strong negative feeling that what right did I have to go out and work with these, you know, here I am, healthy little soul with an expensive camera goes in, takes images and I'm very conscious of that and I agree with it to a large extent, but at the same time, one has to react, I've got to do something and it was, I felt, produced a series of images which actually had had quite a lot of coverage and the fact that they've been bought by the National Gallery means they're going to be seen and I think that the potential for them actually doing some good – because to a large extent the majority of people, the first thing they want to know is not who these people are, they want to know how did you do them? It's a technical gimmick, so that is an attractive component of it to an extent. So despite the fact that I know there's an exploitative aspect to it and it's a discomfort within myself – I don't normally do portraits of other people, I tend to work from memory, I try not to work with a specific other person, in this case it just was that. I feel that in the long run, the exposure that they're getting because of the media, will heighten and raise awareness even if it create some dispute or argument about the right that I have to do that, it raises awareness. I'm happy for that to happen. It doesn't particularly matter to me if some critic comes in and trashes it and says, "How dare you bloody well do that?" I mean, a couple of people have said, "Oh my God, you've lost your edge, these are too pretty." They are very pretty images and someone who tends to make quite more hardcore images it was quite scary, because they're very pretty and they can be quite seductive, you can make these really beautiful ethereal figures and yeah, so I had a little bit of a stress and I mean one's obviously conscious and very sensitive to criticism, you know, you have to be, I mean, it's the only feedback you get on the work that you're doing, it isn't helpful for people to come and say "Oh, we love your work" – it goes nowhere. So I'm very sensitive to the fact of how dare I go in and exploit and also these are very, very pretty images. But the mileage that they've gained and the exposure that they've got I think justifies possibly the problems that I bought in along the way, yeah.

I mean, the other thing is – I was speaking with Clive van den Berg this morning and he’s sort of saying that there’s always a struggle to represent HIV and the effects of the epidemic but without resorting to cliché – so how do you refer to the fact that there are thousands of people dying, well, there’s a thousand people becoming infected every day in South Africa, and that millions of people are dying, how do you keep that image upfront without resorting to the cliché of headstones, crosses, orphaned children and things like that? So what you’ve done, you’re dealing with people who are still alive but they’re dissolving away...

They’re dissolving, they transcend, you touch them and they’re gone.

So I think that evokes that very powerfully but it still makes it new, makes that idea new.

But it still, as I say ... there’s always a two-edge sword on everything you do, yeah.



Diane Victor, from *Smoke Portraits* (2005)

What about your involvement with the billboard project?

That was a couple of years ago, with Jan... what’s his name?

Jan Jordaan.

Jan Jordaan, yes. I hated the image that I sent down for that because it didn’t work.

Which one – I’m trying to remember...

It's a black man with the dog sitting by him.

Oh, with the dog being muzzled, oh, I loved that. 'Cause he looked - the dog's sort of trying to cry out but it's...

Yes, that's what it was about, what was the title of it? 'Breaking the Silence.' It was about, yes, it was this black dog that howls on this thing and it had technical problems for me: that's when I howl about images that they didn't work the way I wanted to. That was three or four years ago, probably even longer, and then went out on the billboard project. I think Jan's been doing some really great stuff going out there and there's another one that he's working on at the moment looking at children issues that I've recently done work for that he's done for that as well. So I've got a great amount of belief and support in what he's doing. I don't think the image that I produced was hardcore enough; it was too pretty.

At the same time, I mean, imagine if you have a far too direct image or - none of those images were sexually explicit either but I mean if you're going to be using a billboard in public places there'll be problems in doing that so... Your image - I remember, it was very brown and black.

Yeah, it was guy and this halo and it was this black guy who is the saint basically, you know, this image that howls, yeah.



Diane Victor 'Break the Silence' billboard, Pretoria, September 2005

So he approached you and sort of said, “We need a one-off for this series, could become a billboard, will you participate?”

Yeah, that’s pretty much the way he works. I mean, I’ve done about three different projects for him, he does human rights; there was a human rights portfolio in about ’95 just after our government started and we each dealt with one of the human rights laws from the constitution and then he’s done this HIV and there’s a children rights one that he’s doing and I fully believe and he goes out there and he gets the funding and he gets these billboards out in the most amazing places. You’ll be driving through some obscure little town up north in Venda [formerly a ‘homelands’ area, now part of Limpopo province] and “Wow, there’s one of Clive’s images or one of Penny’s images” you know – it’s great. It’s also a way of bringing visual arts in the culture as well and raising the awareness within a culture of the power of visual images.

I’m going to be speaking with Jan when I go to Durban in a couple of days’ time so that’ll be good.

Good, good, he’s a great guy.

Which – can you nominate any South African artists whose HIV-related work interests you or inspires you?

Ok, let me think. Wow.

And if not South African, then an international artist.

Probably Churchill – I think Churchill, yeah. I have a lot of respect for Sue Williamson and I think the work that she has done I really appreciate but maybe on a personal level it’s Churchill – Churchill’s stuff, just, yeah.

And why is that?

I don’t know. It might be the immediacy – the work he did with Michael Stevenson was dealing with his sister – and it is that – I always have a problem with being the artist commenting on, you know, it’s so nice and easy to sit in that little, nice position and keep your hands not necessarily too dirty and make an image – it was somebody actually dealing with their own – a cliché of words abound of words you can’t use – but it is, their own family, their own pain and their own suffering and actually producing those images, yeah. And maybe it’s that for me that makes Churchill’s work the most interesting.

Can you think of any instances where you’ve experienced an HIV-related artwork or a theatre production or maybe a movie such as *Philadelphia*, the AIDS quilt and that has changed your perception of the epidemic or your responsibilities within the epidemic, or has it helped you with your own sense of grief or loss or frustration even?

I’m trying to think; my brain is not functioning brilliantly at all. I’m trying to think – there’s been a lot of HIV-based work that I’ve seen that hasn’t worked for me. One’s got

in there, and it tends to clichés and can – it does, it’s dealing with dying people. Give me five on that, I’ll send you info on that, my head, it’s just running blank on that I’m just – not necessarily in South Africa, no, apart from Churchill, no. But my brain is telling me that there’s stuff out there that I know that I’ve seen stuff and it’s like it’s hit you and you thought, “Fuck.” But I can’t give you names, images off-hand, sorry.

No, that’s all right. We know in, and I might have mentioned this before, but that people who feel a sense of hopelessness that the epidemic won’t be ended and they’ve lost loved ones and they lost the partner and those kind of things are the ones who are most at risk of maybe acting irresponsibly or whatever, and one thing that the quilt project aims to do is to try to bring people together to walk around the quilt, see all these lives that have been lost but also to celebrate them as human beings and to memorialise and in that celebration to try to renew peoples’ hopes; that all these people are gathering together, you can see them walking around with you, that these people are going to help you get through this and they’re all committed to maybe ending the epidemic and there’s people walking home after seeing the quilt and they feel renewed, they feel more hopeful. Can you think of any HIV related work which maybe does the same thing?

A similar thing and here?

I mean, did you walk out of Churchill’s exhibition and feel that way? I don’t think you would.

No, I didn’t, no. It was actually more the poignancy, it was the sadness, it was this absolute, I mean, that initial installation he had in the first room with the coffin and the light, although it was fairly theatrical it still was – it was a re-enactment of a funeral service – I suppose it wasn’t that hopeful, no. And even Sue’s work isn’t actually. There’s a lot of cynicism in this country generally, yeah, I think that’s something that’s quite true. And certainly in those heads that I produced there’s not a hope inside, it’s just an ongoing process, I mean, there’s going to be another 500 a day kind of thing, literally yeah. It’s actually quite an interesting point, yes.

But it’s a hard thing to do. How do you speak about hope while at the same time respecting the fact that there’s a lot of despair as well? Siphso Mdanda was showing me some of his images and he has – there’s an image of a rooster on a hill and the hill has all these crosses on it, sort of, gravestones, but behind the rooster, and it’s a dawn and there’s this bright light right down near the hill, the sun rising and it’s about to come up and it’s his way of saying, “Well yes, there’s a lot of death, but the rooster is breaking the silence and if you break the silence then a new dawn can come.” So there was a nice – again possibly a clichéd image and working with very simple motifs but it’s trying to evoke those two things that there is death but there is hope as well as long as people start talking about it though and, you know, opening their mouths.

Yeah, I suppose we do tend to be rather cynical, negative [Paul laughs] no it is! It’s not just on HIV, it’s a crime thing as well, people are like, yeah.

Ok. They're the main things I wanted to look through and I know you're on limited time; is there anything that you wanted to say, either recap on something we've talked about already or another kind of thing you might want to just talk about in terms of that.

Not really – God, I'm really coming across as a bloody idiot I know.

No, not at all, no.

It's because my brain is zonked out – function, function!

When you listen to this back you'll see, wow, you said some really interesting things there.

No, but there obviously is stuff. I'm being serious, I'm going to email you, literally in a couple of days time when I've had sleep and processed, let me just send you stuff based on that question and on that initial question in terms of work that I've seen that's actually affected my position towards – 'cause I know there's stuff that I've seen out there, it wasn't in this country, it was somewhere travelling and I saw stuff that like, yeah, that sort of seminal, just hits you and yeah, you remember it. I'm going to get that information to you. Easier for me to sit down and write when I can process my head in a line.

Ok. Well I'll give you a bit of time and then email a couple of questions; we can do it that way.

Yeah, and just continue on that level, 'cause you really are getting just the survival strip of my brain at the moment I'm sorry, I apologise for that.

It's fine. Thank you very much, I'll turn this off.

Ok, go for it.

[End of interview]

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