

Fiona Kirkwood interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

Durban, South Africa, 21 July 2006

This is a complete and unedited transcript of an interview. It retains grammatical imperfections that inevitably occur in spoken conversation.

Paul Sendziuk: This is an interview with Fiona Kirkwood. It's the 21st of July 2006 and we're at her home in Durban, South Africa. Fiona, I noticed that you've been fairly recently involved in Jan Jordaan's billboard project, which started around 1999/2000. Before talking about that I'm interested in what you think about the government-sponsored billboards that are focussing on HIV prevention at the moment. Can you comment on some of the images and messages that you're seeing in government-sponsored AIDS prevention campaigns on billboards and maybe also on the television?

Fiona Kirkwood: [Pause] That's quite a hard question for me I think to answer because I don't specifically focus on billboards. Jan approached me, or I think I approached him because I thought that *Survival* would be a great work to be on a billboard and he picked up on it immediately and ran with it and managed to get money for it and so on from National Lottery. I don't, sort of, spend my life looking at billboards in the country but I certainly have seen things by 'Love Life' and whatever and they haven't really reached me, they haven't really touched me in terms of HIV/AIDS and I generally think that billboards – I don't know how much accessibility they have to people's sub-conscious minds. I'm not very clear on that, you know, I suppose I hoped when mine was up in the industrial area of Durban as it was for a reasonable, for a shortish period of time, that it would reach truck drivers and so on who were passing that area who were potentially either people who were infected by HIV or potential lethal carriers of the disease because of, you know, contact with prostitutes and so on. So I'm probably not a great person to ask about billboards because it's not my specific area of focus.

That's all right, but do you have any comment about, say, the 'Love Life' campaign then?

Again, I haven't really focussed on that, you know. I'm sure there are people who specifically focussed on that but it's not been a great focus of mine.

Ok, that's fine. Your first piece about AIDS was, I think, *Pandemic Patient* which was first displayed in 1998. Then I understand it was reworked a little bit for the AIDS conference in Durban in 2000. Why did you first begin to make work about the AIDS epidemic?

It's hard to remember exactly what one's thoughts are at a particular time but you know, what I can certainly do is remember things that have influenced me and probably led up to a particular moment in time or moments around a time when I start working on something like that. 1984 I was in Washington DC in – I think it was called Kramer's Bookshop or something in Dupont Circle in Washington – and as I was sitting in this little coffee shop a very, very tall, thin guy who looked very, very ill came and sat down at the table right next to me and his face was quite small so he was really very much

almost on top of me and he looked at me in the face and smiled and I smiled back and he held out his hand and I shook it and he told me basically that he was out from hospital, just got out, and come to go in a Gay Pride March in Washington DC and he was HIV positive and that, you know, he really wanted to do this march and so on and so forth. And then he asked me if he could read out some of his poetry to me that he'd written in hospital and it was very, very dark, heavy stuff and he was incredibly sick looking. And I just remember the experience of that and – because it was my first real connection with HIV/AIDS and it was a long time ago, it was 22 years ago now. And at that point I was very clear that that man was going to die and I was also very clear that I didn't know much about HIV/AIDS and how it was transmitted and so on. I remember the fact that I'd shaken hands with him and sort of being a little bit paranoid about that and sort of almost really hoping, you know, that something worthwhile would come of that guy's life but almost knowing that his destiny was very short. And that was my first connection with it and about two years after that, a gay friend of mine returned from studying in the States – he'd been on a scholarship program for two years – and he also came back not looking well and I had a very bad feeling that he was also suffering from a certain disease, though I never asked him directly. And it did emerge about two years later that he was HIV positive and he died and I was with him very shortly before he died and within a few days of his death, in fact. And then another friend of mine, also gay friend who lives in Zimbabwe, came forward once he was down from Zimbabwe – he's also an artist very much involved in the art world, very established in Zimbabwe – and he swore me to secrecy that I wasn't allowed to tell his parents or any other friend that he was positive and – this was probably the late '80s – and I promised that I would never tell anybody and I never did. I never ever told a soul about it until he told me that it was ok because he declared that he was positive and that was quite a number of years later. And, you know, to experience what he went through on ARVs and alternative health things and the money involved in ARVs and everything else he went to at that point and saw him being really ill and having skin problems and getting different infections and so on and how he felt emotionally and so on and so forth. So the mid to late '80s I was very touched by HIV/AIDS and then from then on I've been very touched by living in this country because it's – I mean, you can't live in South Africa and particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, and not be touched by what's happening if you're at all sensitive. I mean, I suppose people read the papers or choose not to read the papers and the statistics and the next story about somebody who can't get access to ARVs or the child who's just lost the parents or that there are 37% of women going into clinics in KwaZulu-Natal who are HIV positive. I mean, it's impossible for me not to feel strongly that I want to do something. And so in 1998, I remember when I started working on *Pandemic Patient* and I was in my studio, which I can show you later, and I remember sitting on the floor and I was actually – I actually started constructing the figure and I got incredibly sad – I got quite depressed. And I remember making the head, which was out of the AIDS virus which I'd managed to get access to seeing at one of the local hospitals here – they allowed me to look at it down a microscope. And of course it didn't really look like the image that I used, but you know, I looked at that and they also gave me access to the letters that would go out, though I didn't know who the people were, but letters that would go out telling people whether they were positive or negative. And at that point I did a lot of research and spoke to a lot of doctors here – people who tied needles to injuries and asked nurses or doctors what they went through. I had doctors who were very much connected with what was happening. I went into [pause] a sort of hospice, I literally walked through a ward where all the guys were lying on their backs

and you just knew they weren't going to get out of there. And so I've been very deeply touched. And when I made *Pandemic Patient* and exhibited it for the first time, I don't think there was any other AIDS work that had been done in KwaZulu-Natal. I never had seen anything else. And when I put that work out, it had a very mixed response; in fact, quite vehement reactions from certain circles. One art critic absolutely slated it because I'd used condoms – couldn't handle this, thought it was worse than even a [pause] sort of first year fine art student would do and that they would be slated for it and told immediately that they couldn't do this.

So he or she disagreed with the naivety of it, or morally...

He thought it was disgusting. He thought it was disgusting that I was putting condoms out there in an artwork. It was crass.

So he was viewing it as pornographic, I suppose?

I suppose pornographic, crass, tasteless – he couldn't see any merit in it whatsoever. I remember somebody else, another artist here in Kaunas, another artist that thought I shouldn't be doing what I was doing, that it was too sensitive an area and so on. And then I got comments from people who said that they stood next to the work and burst into floods of tears because it touched something in them so deeply. Well, that was 1998 and then I think it was 1999 I was approached to do another work for the 13th International World AIDS Conference at the Durban Art Gallery and I thought about all the comments that had been made and I thought I would be going on – I'm going on and I'm going to use even more condoms – it was obviously defiance in me at that point, just because I felt so strongly about what I was doing. And so then I made a condom quilt which was then put on a hospital bed – I had to get access to a hospital bed and hospital screen, so they're real live things that I got – it was quite an effort, quite a mission – and I hand stitched this condom quilt together out of – I don't how many condoms it was, but I remember stitching it by hand with red thread and...

And they were still in their packets? They're kind of silver, aren't they?

Yes. Well, these ones were just – the government sponsored me and they were just government ones. And anyway, I developed this whole thing – I worked with a video sort of thing as well as part of the work at the Durban Art Gallery and so the thing grew into – I think it was 7.5 by 5 metres, I can't even remember now – it's on my website. But it was a very large installation.

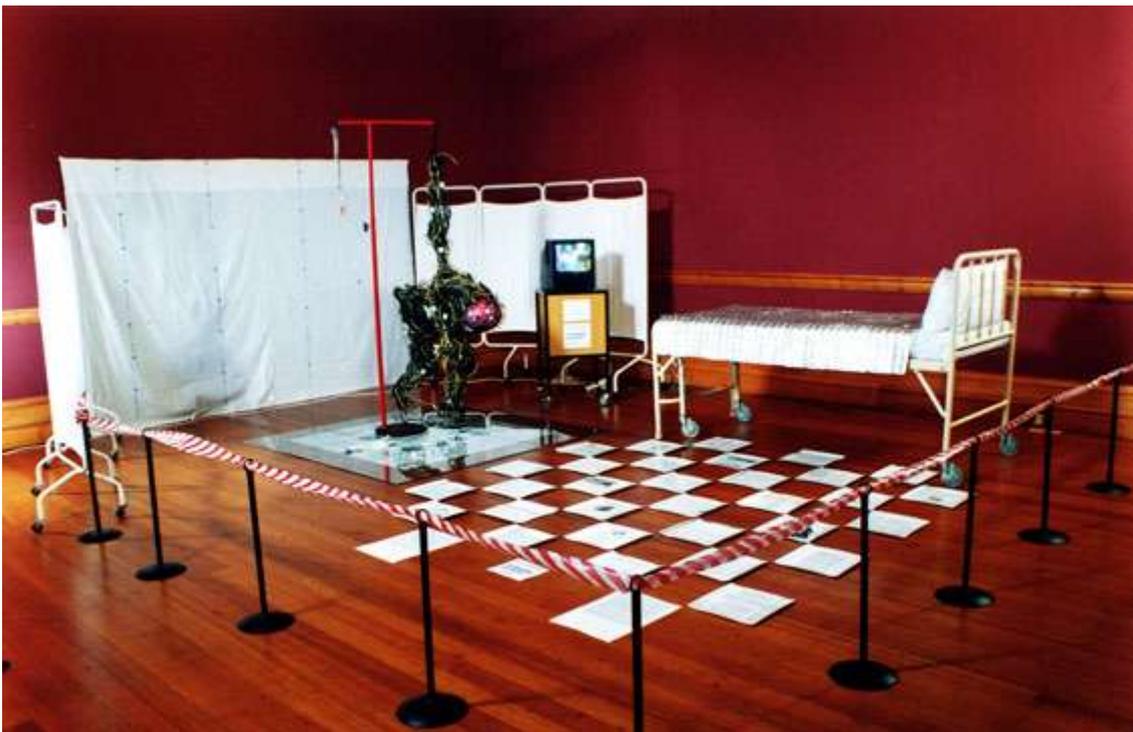
And so the original one from 1998 was just the figure, the sculpture...

It was just the figure with some information round the base of it and some condoms lying at the base of the figure and, yeah, it was more the sculpture and with the test tubes and the bags, the drip stand and so on. And then that became embellished with a lot more information which I gathered over a two year period about HIV/AIDS, what was happening in KwaZulu Natal, so I sort of littered the floor, almost made a carpet if you like, of floor tiles which were completely saturated with information that I'd gathered over the two year period between 1998 and 2000. So I think when I started on that path I knew that I was going into an area that wasn't at all comfortable, and it

wasn't comfortable, even because of feedback that I was getting, whether it was positive or negative it was uncomfortable. But I knew that I had to go on. I couldn't – once I'd taken it on I couldn't stop.

What was on the video screens?

I can't remember exactly, I'd have to go back to that, but I know it was a kind of irony I think on the video between this playful world, this kind of fantasy world that people think they're living in and then there were sort of images of AIDS and information about AIDS sort of permeating through it. So it had a kind of, I mean, I suppose it had a bit of shock value in it as well, but it certainly wound around what I was doing with *Pandemic Patient* so in a way it pulled it – it fused it together, but it had a lighter impact because I think it – I felt *Pandemic Patient* was a very heavy work. Anyway, subsequently, and I know a lot of people saw it and I've even met people years later – in fact I was in Lithuania last year and I met a couple and they said, "What's your name?" and I said, "Fiona Kirkwood" and they said, "Oh, but we saw your work in 2000 at the AIDS conference, it was called *Pandemic Patient*" and they actually took photographs and I think videoed it and everything and it'd gone – they lived in Ireland. So you know, one did know where – how things were reaching out.



Fiona Kirkwood, *Pandemic Patient*, 2000.

So – just thinking about the elements of the meaning of the installation then – you've got the hospital bed with the blanket of condoms symbolising, I suppose, protection and the blanket meaning comfort and security if you're using condoms. The patient itself, the sculpture of the patient, and the information around it, is basically hitting the audience over the head and saying, "Listen, AIDS is here, let's not deny we've got this problem and look at all this information we've got about it."

I think I was feeling that – it was 1998 and I thought people are not talking about this thing, they're not actually – they're not really aware of what's going on. So I think it was about that, it was like saying, "Look, for God's sake, this is it, this is real, this is actually happening here, look at it!" I think it was really about confrontation.



Fiona Kirkwood, *Pandemic Patient* [details of installation], 2000.

I can't think of any work – except for the work by some photographers before 1998 – dealing with HIV at that time in South Africa, by which time we've known about AIDS for years, you know, since 1981 if you go back to America, and in Africa since at least the early '90s. Why hadn't there been an artistic response to the epidemic in South Africa until that point?

I don't know. I don't actually know. I can only really talk about myself and maybe at that point in that exhibition I was ready, or something fused in me and that direction came out. I don't really know. I can't answer that but I'm certainly not aware of anything here before that period.

And in 2000, during the International AIDS Conference, it was exhibited at the Durban Art Gallery, I think. Where was it exhibited in 1998 and has it been exhibited elsewhere since?

In 1998 it was exhibited at the NSA Gallery, or it's now called the KZNSA Gallery – K-Z-N-S-A, oh God...

It wasn't a good career move for the gallery to change its name, was it?

[Laughs] KwaZulu Natal Society of Arts Gallery, whatever that is; yeah, it wasn't a good move to change the gallery name. Anyway, it was exhibited there in 1998. I didn't exhibit it anywhere else apart from the conference in 2000, it hasn't been seen anywhere else.

Ok.

Except on my website which is obviously going out 'live' now.

And a very nice website it is as well: logical, and some beautiful images on there as well and informative text so. I've seen some pretty crummy artists' websites which aren't very helpful at all but your one is very good.

Thank you.

Tell me, I think you did something called *Condom Coat* that was exhibited, I think, in 2001, which consists of a long loose fitting coat made from condoms that you've sewed together. Again, there might've been some other elements that I'm not familiar with. Can you tell me about the impetus behind that?

Well, I was working on an exhibition called 'Coats and Coverings', that was the theme of it, using coat as a metaphor for protection and so I saw the condom again as being this thing that people could use to protect themselves from getting HIV/AIDS and also STDs and pregnancy and whatever else have you around it, so that was my reason for doing *Condom Coat*. And I think I managed to get sponsorship – I mean, this was a whole story; let me tell you the story because it's terribly interesting, I mean, it really is fascinating. I managed to get sponsorship for the first lot – I think the Department of Health for *Pandemic Patient* – then for the second thing – I can't even remember how it came about but somehow somebody put me onto a condom company which is based in Johannesburg and I phoned them up and they said, "Well, how many condoms would you like?" and I said, "Oh, probably about 3000 or maybe 3500." So I went to the depot here to collect them and the woman – when I phoned the woman at the desk said, "What vehicle are you coming in?" and I said, "Oh, just an ordinary car," I said, "Why?" And she said, "Oh, you might need something bigger than that." So anyway I got there – or maybe she told me that when I got there – but anyway, that's what she told me and I said to her, you know, "Why – what's the problem?" and she said, "Well, there's a lot of big boxes." So out came these big cardboard boxes and I said to her, "Is this for me?" And I said, you know, "I did ask for 3500" and she said "Well, I don't know," and I said, "Can I just quickly phone your Johannesburg office and speak to the woman there in charge of the factory?" And she said, "Sure, but we couldn't get you on the line." So I managed to get

them home, into the car (quite an effort) and I took one box into the studio and I unpacked it and I started counting how many condoms were in each box and I thought “Oh my God, they’ve given me 35,000 condoms!” They were condoms that were redundant, I mean, they were all rejects, but I thought, “I’ve got 35,000 condoms, what am I going to do with all this?” So I phoned the factory and said, “Look, there’s been a mistake” and she said, “Oh my goodness, you know, you can get them back to us,” and I said, “Do you want them back? They’re rejects.” And she said, “No, not really,” she said, “as long as you don’t dispose of them in a waste dump or that somebody else gets their hands on them and uses them wrongly,” and I said, “Well, I promise that won’t happen.” The same company then ended up giving me coloured condoms as well which looked a bit like, you know, sweeties, these brightly coloured condoms and so I used those on the back of the coat. On the inside of the coat was, again, the AIDS virus; it was just like the inside lining, as it were, of the coat.



Fiona Kirkwood, *Condom Coat*, 2001.

What was that made out of?

It was made of paper and condoms. And then I had to find a way to keep the condoms together because gravity, you know, it was fine on the bed when they were just lying on top of the bed in *Pandemic Patient*, but when they’re hanging they’re all just going to just fall apart and start ripping. So I discovered this whole process of packaging that I could organise. Then I had to get sponsorship for that, and I think the more, you know, I think from *Pandemic Patient* onwards and even before that I’d been working more and more with sponsors. That’s the way I’ve been able to go on with my work: through people being prepared to help either by donating materials or funding in some way that would give me, you know, the possibility of going on with the work. That was how I got all these condoms. I ended up with boxes and boxes of condoms here. So I decided that I

needed to use to condoms and then came the 'Survival' piece. I was approached to do something – I think it was Bren Brophy from HIVAN who approached me, he wasn't at HIVAN then, but he approached me – or maybe he was, yeah, he must've been at HIVAN then – he approached me about doing something for the South African AIDS conference, it was the tenth one or something.

So this was around about 2003?

Yeah, that's it. And he just said, "Fiona, you know, you've been doing a lot of work around HIV/AIDS," he was very familiar with my work and he said, "Look, would you be interested in doing something?" And I said, "Yes, as long as a can do a piece using condoms again that's on the floor." And he said, "What are you thinking of doing?" And I said, "I don't know, but it's got to be something that spells out a word and it's going to be on the floor." So already I had this vision of it and I knew it was going to be big but I didn't know what the word was going to be but I knew something was going to happen. And then I phoned up a researcher, Eleanor Preston-Whyte, who's a director, one of the directors at HIVAN, and Jerry Coovadia of HIVAN – I've been in touch with a lot of researchers since 1998 – people here who are very much steeped in AIDS because I was aware that my knowledge was, and still is, very limited compared to theirs. So anyway, Eleanor and I – we sort of battered round some ideas in a bit of discussion – she was on the phone in Johannesburg – she was about to head off somewhere and she just said, "Look, let me put you onto Ida Susser who's an American based in New York, she's an anthropologist and she's going to be here, she's coming to Durban, so let me link you with her; and have you thought of working with the female condom?" And I said, "No, I haven't even seen a female condom. I've heard of them, but I've never seen one." And she said, "Well, that might be an idea," and she said, "Ida's the person." So then I met Ida and said, "Hey, this is a great idea, I've never seen the female condom." And she said, "Oh, here we are, I've got one in my bag." [Both laugh] So I said, "Is that what it looks like?" And she said, "Do you want to keep it?" And I said, "Well, can I hang onto it, just so I can sort of see what it's like?" So that's how I got the female condom.



Fiona Kirkwood, *Survival* [detail featuring the female condom], 2003.

You were in a coffee shop somewhere in Durban doing this?

Yeah, she was here; she was actually here in this house. And anyway, so she was an anthropologist and she was very much involved with the female condom and its efficiency and effectiveness in Africa and other parts of the world and so she linked me to the person who made female condoms. There was this immediate – this phone call to America, to Chicago, and the next thing these female condoms are being sent by the factory written to me and I'm still saying, "What the hell am I going to do with it? What is this word?" And Ida and I were brainstorming and brainstorming and nothing was coming. And then one day I went out for this walk which I do quite regularly, I go for a walk, and I went for this walk and I was feeling a bit low and I was actually thinking about my own life and I was walking around and I was really feeling really low and I don't know, I just suddenly thought about life and something came through and I thought, "Yeah, I suppose at the moment I feel as if I'm surviving or something or it's about survival," and that was it! And it was because I had to touch that place – it's always when I touch something in my own self that then it came through and I thought, "It's survival! This is the word, I've hit it, I feel it, I don't need anybody else telling me anything, this is it, this is the word!" And I came back here and I phoned up Ida, phoned up Bren, and I said to each of them, "I've decided what I'm going to do," and they said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm going to write the word survival." And he said, "Brilliant, that's the idea," and that's it, I didn't need anyone to tell me! [Laughs] I phoned up Ida and I said, "Ida, I've got the word." And she said, "What's that?" And I said, "It's survival." And she said, "That's it!" She said it couldn't be anything better than that. And so that's what happened. And then I made this work *Survival*. You know some of the history of *Survival* – that it was shown then at the conference, and then it was shown at Pietermaritzburg at the Tatham Gallery not that long after that, I think within the same year or something. And then I started, I don't know, I kept feeling that my works are being shown in galleries – this isn't right. I need to be reaching the people more. Ok, school kids are seeing them, there's a lot of school kids coming through and you know, I don't know who's seeing them, maybe it's a lot of people that really need to see it, but maybe it's not and this started bothering me. And then a friend of mine who's an artist here said to me, he said, "You know, Fiona, your work needs to get out of the gallery." And I said, "I know, but I don't quite know how to get it out there, you know, I don't know what it is that I'm meant to do to get it out there but I know I've got to get beyond the gallery because it's not reaching enough of the people that I needed to see this work." And so that sat uncomfortably with me probably for about six months or something and then I heard about this exhibition called 'Tangencya' which was in 2004 and my mother had just died and I'd just come back from Scotland and thought, "Oh, I'd love to do something for this exhibition but it's too soon." And it was about artists working in public spaces in the KwaZulu-Natal Durban area and working issue-based and I thought, "Well, that has to be HIV/AIDS, but how am I going to do it, I don't have the time?" And then I thought, "*Survival*. I could take this work now and I can use it in a different way." And I approached him and I said, "Look, you know, this is what I'm thinking of doing, what do you think?" And he said, "Well, put something in writing," and I said, "Ok," but I said, "I'm about to go off to New Zealand and I don't know how I'm going to do it all before I go." And I went off to New Zealand and by that point I was too late to go in the gallery and he said "Well, look, just come in on the fringe of it." And I said, "Well, that's fine, I don't care, as long as I'm on it, that's fine, I'll be there," 'cause at

that point the funding had already gone and I was just too late to get funding for it. So I came in and just got sponsorship – left, right and centre went reaching out for sponsorship – and I managed to get it with a great deal of an effort, but I got it. And so *Survival* went into the Workshop Shopping Complex, which is really right in the downtown area of Durban and it was seen by thousands of people, I mean, probably at least 10,000 – it's difficult to quantify – but it was thousands and thousands of people.

I was at the Workshop yesterday and it is one of the busier places in downtown Durban for sure.

So you're tuned to where I was? That was good planning.

They've got a big chess board set-up at the Workshop – was it close to that?

I was in a little – off the bridge upstairs. But the walk we did also with a group of people, some of whom were HIV positive, was from the AIDS ribbon outside. Did you see the AIDS ribbon in Gugu Dlamini Park? Oh, you would've seen it.

I might've. I've seen a lot of AIDS ribbons so...

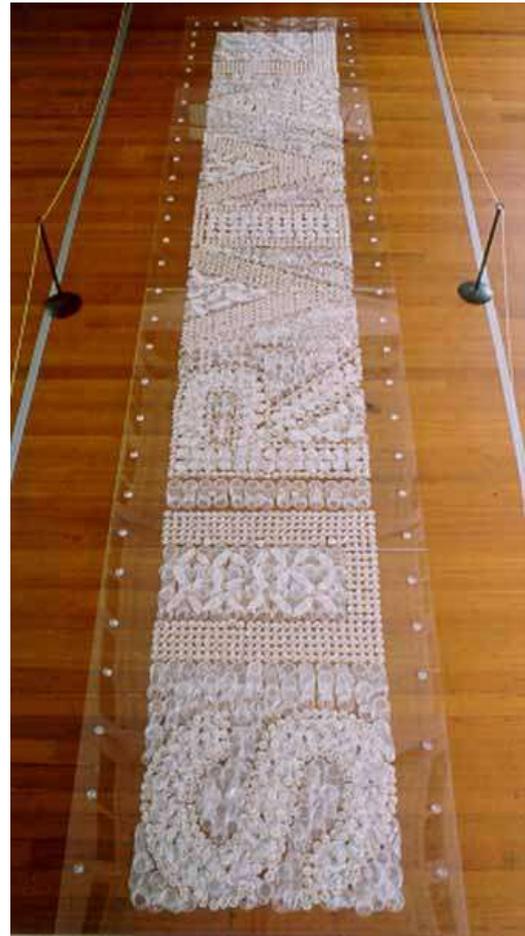
It was a massive one. You would've seen it – if you'd seen it you would've – it doesn't matter. That's at the back of the Workshop and so we even worked outside at one point and then came in and up, but the work was right in the middle upstairs in the Workshop in an area which is ironically called 'Sloane Square' because when the Workshop was first designed it was during apartheid so it was very much the Sloane sort of set of Durban who were using the Workshop Shopping Centre. And I mean now it's people from Kwa Mashu, Umlazi, townships who you know, who may be Sloanes but they're different Sloanes.

What's a Sloane?

Sloane Square is an area in London which is very much you know, kind of young yuppie set, kind of moneyed, yuppie set, so that's a Sloane, that's Sloane Square. So it's still called Sloane Square. It should be called something else square now, but it's not – so many street names have been changed here. So anyway, it really accessed people and I managed to get the condom company who sponsored me here to bring down from Johannesburg – they actually came down and bought thousands of coloured condoms and we gave those out free and they were beautifully packaged and they were called 'The Real McCoy' or something, but then the company had gone bust in the meantime and so they were just donating leftovers, but they were fantastic.

So they weren't reject condoms, those ones? They were 'the real McCoy'.

They were the real thing. And we did a lot of – I got a lot of organisations like Lifeline and the HIVAN Reproductive Health and Research Unit who came in on the female condom side, showing people how to use them – not sort of graphically but, you know, illustratively.



Fiona Kirkwood, *Survival* [details of installation], Workshop Shopping Centre, Durban, 2003.

So they were based on site around the work at certain points in time, giving information out?

Absolutely. Always, always, always, all the time there was stuff happening, yeah. So it was a huge effort to just organise that and do that networking with all these people but the all just came on board, even at the last minute they came on board. Medical Research Council was involved, so they were giving out information to the public and so on and so forth all the time.

How long does it take to install the work? Because I imagine placing the condoms and...

It took me two days, and it was backbreaking. I mean, it was – you’ll see me on the video – I was down on my hands and knees – it took me two days. And that was really pushing it. And I had that processed, documented, because I’d always – I knew I was very aware when I was setting up in the first place that I should’ve documented it because I just felt it was a process – it could be used in another way that – in another way of taking my work out into public. So the whole process of what happened with the public I had documented – me setting it all up, the interaction with the public, so I’ve got unbelievable footage of that. The reactions from the public about condoms, I mean, it’s a hell of a carry-on in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in Africa. Men don’t believe in condoms, I mean, it’s this whole patriarchal society, so women coming to me crying saying you know, they’d like to use them but their husbands or their boyfriends don’t want to and there was a lot of interest in the female condom; some women did know about them, some women were using them but it was very much the minority. So I mean, the people were kind of – they were mind-boggled you know, seeing this thing lying on the floor of this Workshop Shopping Centre. And I was quite amazed in fact that the Workshop actually took it on, but they did; they did because they believed in what was behind it and they just said, “Look, you know, we’re prepared to take this on,” and they actually tried to get an award for the shopping centre out of that work [both laugh] but they never got it. I think they came close, but they didn’t actually get it. But then *Survival* and the DVD and everything won an award at the 5th Kaunas Art Biennial in Lithuania in October, 2005. I won first prize for this work at a big international show, so you know, I’ve been sort of like moving out of the gallery into the public space, back into the gallery and so sort of, you know, all this, I don’t know, it’s taking it’s own path and then I make a work and then the work gets remade in some way and goes like *Survival* onto the billboard, you know, *Survival* into the public space, *Survival* to Lithuania in a different form, so...

How was it received in Lithuania? Actually, first of all, were you there? Did you travel over?

Yeah, I did go over. I think it was very, very well received because it won that award and I think, you know, obviously I don’t know what local people were saying because I don’t speak Lithuanian and I wasn’t there long enough to get all their responses, but apparently there was an incredible amount of response to the work. And it was visual, so they could see, you know, when it’s visual you don’t always need language either. And I think that they felt – I did get some written responses about it actually, Paul, on emails even from Lithuania afterwards, now that you’re reminding me. And I think that they seem to think that it touched people very deeply. They really, really, sort of affected people on a very emotive level. I think the *Pandemic Patient* did, I mean, it got the violent reactions one way or the other, you know, positively or negatively, so it had people reacting emotionally to it and I think *Survival* has had the same effect.

Well, what’s different about *Survival* even as opposed to *Pandemic Patient* and opposed to a lot of work that deals with AIDS, is that it’s actually a very hopeful piece. There is a lot of AIDS work with crosses and gravestones in it and this one is not talking about that.

Well, no it's – what can we do? What can we do? I mean, it's like condom code: what can we do to actually protect ourselves? What can we do? There's so much we can do and yes, we can survive this thing you know, we can find ways to help ourselves to get through this whole devastating pandemic.

And was there any evidence from the responses that you got that people did walk away from that feeling a bit more empowered and a bit more hopeful?

Oh yeah, definitely. There was many responses from, you know, people standing sort of with their fingers or faces sort of trying to read, walking up and down and trying to read the work and “Oh yeah,” now they sort of got it, you can see them chatting, sometimes giggling, sometimes you know, people standing and saying, “Oh God, what's this?” Many different responses but definitely, yeah, it seemed to have a – I would say generally it was more positive than anything else in fact.

I'm just imagining standing up close to the work – it would be quite difficult to decipher what was being spelt until possibly you stand a little bit further back; or you might really have to look hard at it before the word becomes apparent.

Yeah, you've got to walk along – if you just walk along it then the word becomes – is very apparent. You can sort of see the letters but you have to walk along it or stand – really take it in to get that, 'cause close up you're seeing the details.

So even as a person does that, if it takes them 40 seconds to work out what it is, there's a bit of a euphoria once, “Oh, I can see it!” There's an inspiration there.

Yeah, you could see that, definitely was. You could see the faces, you know, and sort of...

And if you tie that back, then, to the emotion that they're feeling when they've worked it out to the hopeful message – I'm just saying it sort of exacerbates that sense of hopefulness and joy about the work rather than it's, yeah, the negative component.

Yeah, I agree with you.

What about *The Washing Line* piece, was I think a part of...?

I think *The Washing Line* piece is again a challenging work. I think it challenges, because it's not about protection.

Can you explain what it consisted of first?

Or perhaps it's about protection but in a different sense. It is about protection but in a different way. *The Washing Line*, as I'd set it up at the Workshop Shopping Centre – again, we set it up outside of the Workshop, this time in an area where it was really hitting a different public because this time it was street kids, it was prostitutes, it was school-goers, it was students, it was housewives, it was gogos (that's the word for granny in Zulu); it was all people but it was mainly young people...

Because you've got the bus station and the mini-buses going in and out from outside the Centre.

Yeah, this was really down to the nitty-gritty now. We set it up inside on one day but we didn't stay inside. It was comfortable inside but it wasn't where it was really – it really affected people on the outside. And we also worked in the amphitheatre outside, which is like a stage where people have live performances and we had a kind of a live performance there on the last session. It was the 26th of April. Again I managed to bring in a whole lot of organizations to be part of it, acting out roles. There was Wentworth Organization of Women who deal with women abuse and everything kind of relating to women really, and there was Oby Obyerodhyambo, I can't even pronounce his name, from Kenya, who's a theatre animator. There were Men as Partners who basically came on board at the last minute because I only heard about them the day before. One of them became the MC for the whole thing. I managed to get eThekweni Municipality – we managed to get them involved. They brought the music system so there was live music sort of pounding on and off throughout the thing and they were excellent; it was completely improvised and they just seemed to know exactly when to put the music on and what the right music was and everything and there was...

So by doing that, and collaborating with all those different people, you're losing a fair bit of control over the space and the work; were you comfortable enough with that, or...?

Yes, I was. I just had to let it go. It was scary. It was very scary in a way because I suppose I wasn't comfortable. I'd put such an effort into linking with all these people and, I mean, I couldn't tell them what they were going to do, I just had to say, "Look, this is what I've got and this is, you know, the kind of ideas around it and do you think you could come in?" There was no time; everything happened so quickly, there was no time for me to say, "Look, do that," or, "You're going to have to do that better because I don't like that," or, you know, I just had to take what they gave me. And I remember at one point, I mean it was like, "Oh God, is somebody going to arrive and how is this going to be?" And then I thought, "Fiona, girl, you've got no control today, you just do what you can do and help out where you see it and you've just got to let it go." And I just gave in to the whole process of it. And actually [laughs] I mean in some ways it actually worked brilliantly and in some ways it didn't – it could've been better 'cause it wasn't always as focussed as I would've liked around the gender issue but in some ways it worked absolutely brilliantly and there were things that happened that were way beyond my wildest imaginings.

Like what?

Well, you'll see on the DVD footage. There were people from the public who came and stood up on the stage area and were like orators to the whole public talking about HIV/AIDS and what people should do – I mean it was unbelievable. I was riveted at times. There was a huge crowd of people, I mean it was thousands of people just standing around watching. [Pause] There were just things where the public participated or where the MC would reach out to the public in a completely unrehearsed manner and bring people in and it was just actually mind-boggling.

Now, Men Without...

Men as Partners.

Men as Partners, they're sort of a men's support group aren't they, where they start trying to think about how can men be role models and take more responsibility in bringing up kids and more responsibility within relationships and things like that, aren't they?

Exactly, all around HIV/AIDS.



Fiona Kirkwood, *The Washing Line*, Workshop Shopping Centre, Durban, 2006.

And what did your particular installation consist of and what was the idea behind it? You said something about...

I think it actually came into my head sitting in this room because I had to decide very early, I mean, I knew there was this situation – again it was ‘Tangencya 2’ – I knew I was going to be involved in that again and I thought, “What the heck am I going to do this time?” And I thought, “I’ve got hardly any time to decide on anything.” And through discussions with people here, in reading and so on, researching, it became quite clear that the thing that I wanted to deal with was really behaviour, people’s behaviour and to let people look at their behaviour, because, you know, if they’re not wanting to use condoms or if that message is not getting through, there has to be something else, some other way of accessing their mentality. And so it really became clear that gender issues were the big problem, that gender equality was a major factor. And it was just to try and touch in some way – even if I just accessed a few people, as is probably what I always would do anyway – and make them think and make them change their behaviour, maybe it would be worthwhile. So that was really my intention: to make people look at their behaviour and to look at the issue of patriarchy in Africa and South Africa; this thing of men and male domination and men having the right to tell women what they can and cannot do. I mean, I’m not particularly a women’s liberationist, but I’m a free spirit and you know, I don’t believe in – I believe that anything’s possible and it shouldn’t just be people dominating each other. And so that’s really where it started and I felt, “Well, how am I going to do this? How am I going to access people?” And I thought, “I’ve got to do something that’s really grounded,” and I kept thinking about *Survival* and I thought, “That message got through so quickly; how am I going to do something?” And I thought, “It doesn’t matter even if the message doesn’t go through in that same way, as long as they get it in some form. It doesn’t have to come through in the same manner.” And so what then happened – I think I was sitting in this room, and I don’t know how it was, but I started thinking about clothing and I thought, “Clothing, clothing, people all wear clothing, we all wear clothing.” And then I don’t know, and my mind jumped to washing, washing clothes, cleansing, getting things out and then I just thought, “It’s the washing line!” And it was like *Survival* again, I didn’t need anybody suggesting anything, I just thought, “This is it!” And I sent a letter off immediately, I mean it was some ramshackle letter, absolutely gibberish, to this organisation that was involved with ‘Tangencya 2’ and I said, “This is what I want to do,” and I set it out and at that point my ideas were very loose and a bit sort of combobulated, but I knew that that was the essence of it, that I was going to work with clothing; it was going to be items of clothing that people would identify with: trousers, skirts, short skirts, little babies clothes, pregnant women’s dresses. So people from different aspects of society – in our society – that you know, people here on the grass-roots would relate to, those kind of clothes. So then I went looking for second-hand clothes and there was a whole debate over whether I should then look at clothes that people had worn who had died of HIV/AIDS, somebody brought that up, and I thought about it for a day and then I thought about asking my maid’s son because he’s HIV positive and I thought, “No, Fiona, you can’t do that.” So that became completely out of the question and I thought, “No, it’s got to be certain type of clothes and if it’s got any connection with HIV/AIDS, well, I won’t know it because I don’t know who these people are.”

And so that’s what I did. I worked with second-hand clothes so then went around second-hand clothing shops downtown Durban, outside Durban and picked out some

things and put those together. I managed to get some students to help me and they were fantastic – four Fine Arts students from DUT. Basically I'd worked out all the ideas but they helped me with it, just technically, helping to write some things onto clothes or stencilling things, messages, and we had long discussions about it. I think they grew and learnt because they became part of the whole process. Some of them were very interested in the whole area and I think for them it was a great experience. It was wonderful for me having them because I could bat the ideas about or just say, "Well, this is really bad," and you know, "That poor person," and whatever was happening at the Workshop, they were there to help me facilitate it. So that's really how *The Washing Line* came about.

There were two washing lines, one for male clothing from child to adult, and one for female clothing, child to adult. And the whole idea was that people would interact around those clothes; that there would be interaction by facilitators that I had; I had a Zulu speaking woman – I was supposed to have a Zulu speaking guy who was used to working at grass-roots level around HIV/AIDS and he ended up in a car accident so he couldn't help but she was able to do it. She was fantastic and she worked with the people roundabout speaking Zulu and drew the crowds in and you know, the people were asking, "What does this mean? Oh yeah, abused, yeah, people think, you know, because you wear a short skirt here you deserve to be abused," and – because I had this little mini skirt, this black, hot, little number with a little sign saying 'abused' on it and you know, people – once they got one thing, then "Shhh," they were like right through. "Oh yeah, that's a babies panties, yeah, you know, they're raping kids, they're only like six months old and they're raping them and they're raping them because they think if they rape them they're going to clear themselves of HIV, and then they won't have it anymore or, you know, they just abuse us and rape us." I mean, there was so much discussion happening around that work. And men coming in and saying, well, you know, "If women wear those short skirts, you know, it's just a piece of meat, men think it's a piece of meat and they're going to chase this piece of meat," and there were horrific things coming up. And then this whole Jacob Zuma trial, this was all going on at the same time, this whole thing about Jacob Zuma and you know, how he raped this HIV positive woman who was a friend of the family and didn't have a condom and I mean, that was full on in the press and so that fell right in. So I had this jacket that said 'Vote for Me ABC' on it with a condom sticking out the pocket and people were going up and going, sort of, "Jacob Zuma." So I suppose in a way, the work was challenging and confrontational. It was designed to make people talk and think and interact around it and go off thinking, well, you know, "Ok, if we're going to have multiple partners, then we've got to have protective sex otherwise we're going to infect each other," you know. I mean, that's a huge issue in Africa.

And so you've got these educators around the work as well – was it just a matter of the audience coming in and walking up and down the clotheslines and then these people sort of coming and whispering in their ear or tapping them on the shoulder or was there more scheduled set times where...?

No, I think people would sort of say – would probably be standing there saying, "I wonder what this is?" or "Oh yeah, this is about HIV/AIDS but it's a washing line." No, there were kind of people all the time, facilitators around all the time so it wasn't really scheduled, especially when we were at the back of the – we were at the back facing Gugu

Dlamini Park so we had this huge HIV/AIDS ribbon – you’ll see it in the video – behind us, it was framing us all the time. And around the washing line I had poles with heads on them – they almost had a figurative element about them – and on the heads were AIDS ribbons and also the sign, kind of the universal sign for male/female you know, almost like toilet signs in a way so that people would connect this thing, HIV/AIDS, male/female clothes, so there’d be this way of linking together. So people immediately got the AIDS connection and then it was, “Ok, it’s HIV/AIDS clothes. Oh yeah, multiple partners. Oh yeah, you know, yeah.” I mean, African men, even the women, are having many partners and you know, they don’t know if that one’s positive or that one’s negative or they haven’t been tested and we had people coming up asking us about testing and where could they go to get testing and that they were worried that they were positive and so all sorts of stuff was fused around this washing line. The washing line’s really was a place where – it’s a woman’s place, it’s a place where women sort of stand around talking as they’re hanging up the washing. But in this eventuality we had males and females standing around the washing line. I mean we even met a prostitute one day who said she was going to go and bring her girls and I don’t know if she did bring her girls but she certainly came back a few times and she was in a hell of a jam. And then we got the public interacting. I had this idea that we’d have a public washing line so we made little pieces of paper clothing and we then got pens and we got the public writing their responses to the work on their own washing line so there were these other washing lines, public washing lines, that got strung up.

And they did that? That sort of idea worked?

Oh yeah.

What sort of things did they write?

Oh God! I’ve got some and you can see them. Yeah, I’ve got some amazing stuff.



Fiona Kirkwood, *The Washing Line* [detail showing audience responses], Durban, 2006.

Like you said, the washing line is the woman's space, it's a woman's activity, men, African men possibly would already feel uncomfortable in that domain, never mind the fact that they're starting - they must feel a bit under siege because - they must've felt some of this anger that you have and frustration you have was coming through the work and...

I think it was probably more subtle because there were a lot of different clothes and the words weren't very specific, so you know, it just said multiple partners and you might be walking at a distance and saw multiple partners - you wouldn't necessarily have picked up - I think, and because the Workshop is an area where clothes are being sold around the outside of it anyway it wouldn't necessarily alienate people because clothes are something you're used to looking at there anyway, especially in the stalls around the outside of it. So I don't know that it necessarily alienated people. The evidence wasn't that because there were certainly a hell of a lot of people passing by and interacting around it, men and women, and then at the amphitheatre that day, I mean, it was supercharged, well, you'll see in the DVD, with men and women - it certainly never was just women.

Because that is one of the difficulties of AIDS-related work and particularly stuff which has a message to it; first of all, as soon as people see that it's an AIDS work they can turn off and as soon as men in particular see that it's an AIDS work that's directing implicit criticism at them they'll turn off or they'll react to it.

Well I think initially - and I think it's a good point - when I was thinking initially of working onto the clothes I was going to do it in a much more direct way like writing words like 'rape' and then I decided not to do that. I decided that it had to be a little bit more subversive and a little bit more subtle so that people wouldn't be switched off because my fear was if I did it the other way there would be [a disconnect]. So I had to - I sort of softened it down so that the male gaze was more comfortable.

With all of the works that we've talked about, how important is it that the work is aesthetically pleasing? I mean, are you interested in the form and that it possibly looks beautiful or that it looks like it's an art piece rather than, you know, something else? I mean, are you interested in the form as well?

I think I have to be. I mean I'm a visual artist and that's my essence and so you know, the visual is very important but I think that the work I constructed at the [pause] you know, this last piece, *The Washing Line*, I mean, if it had been for the gallery I would've put an awful lot of attention to detail into it and I think it would've come out a different way and in fact I've actually done a reconstruction of *The Washing Line* which is now going to be going round the country to different museums. So I've made a new installation of *The Washing Line* which I don't even have images yet because I haven't even seen it myself yet, it's gone off in bits and pieces to a museum, to the Durban Art Gallery or to the Tatham Art Gallery and then it's going to be shown there in September - I think the exhibition opens on the 7th of September and then it's going to travel around the country as part of a big group exhibition. So now I've done another work which is a gallery piece which is much more refined and the work - I've got the baby and you know, the pregnant woman's dress, it's now being hand embroidered so it's much more refined and much more an art piece and I've got very big images, photographic images, which

I've had framed really quite expensively which are part of the work. The whole thing is different to the thing that was there so I think maybe that answers your question.

I've got a sneaking suspicion you might find it to be an anti-climax compared to the original piece, considering how vibrant the original work seemed to be. You might well be disappointed once you see it in a gallery space.

I wonder.

I hope not, but yeah. But then again you have changed it and as you've said, you've made it into a more refined piece.

And also the DVD – the DVD is going off to the exhibition as well so people will be able to see – they'll be able to see what happened.

All right. Well how 'bout we have a look at some of that on the video. We're doing quite well – it's about quarter to 12:00pm.

I've tried to talk quite fast! [laughs]

And very interesting. I'll turn this off then.

[End of interview]

If citing this interview, please use the following:

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