

## French Letters for my Daughter<sup>1</sup>

*Sterile. Unfruitful. Barren.  
Not Producing or Unable to Produce...  
Sterilised, Destitute of Ideas or Results.*<sup>2</sup>

Dear Julia,

I was your absent father. You grew up with a snapshot (kept in your mother's jonkmanskas) of yourself as a toddler alongside a structure of glass and perspex and condoms. You have written to me "there was always a poignant irony in the image of me (small) gazing up lovingly at the condom-box. If you had worn one, perhaps I wouldn't have been here. Ha-ha."

You have asked me to remake the *BOX*, and I have tried to recreate it as accurately as possible, 'at face value', and without second thoughts.

In 1967 at art school I was unable to properly finish construction of the *BOX* (it was impossible for me within the deadline) with its modern appliance aesthetic and pneumatic challenges, so I had to stammer a verbal presentation of the half-made work to our sophisticated mentor-lecturer-arbiter, with reference to the bits and pieces spread (as I remember) on the tarmac outside the studio building. Was I unconvincing? Did the work fail as a concept? Would it have meant more as an object?

I remember the shock when this man, who had opened our eyes to contemporary art, and whom we so revered, advised that I should "use balloons".

*Aborted at conception, the BOX and its rejection stalked me, at a distance - for years.*

In 1975 I realised that I needed to show the work. I had just finished the first 'final' version when I took time off to visit an exhibition of formalist perspex sculpture. Enraged after drinking too much wine and being (violently) thrown out into the night, I rushed home (to your mother's house) and stupidly kicked my work to pieces. Later, at a meeting arranged for mutual apology, the dealer explained (without irony) that he had been anxious, as this was a new venture - he had recently sold his previous business that specialised in Pest Extermination.

You were two months old.

A year later a reconstructed *BOX* was exhibited at the Space Gallery. By chance I met our former lecturer, the balloon man, in the street outside and invited him to come upstairs to see the work. But, as he climbed into his parked car, it was clear that, if he did vaguely remember me, he had no recall of the *BOX* episode, and had to be somewhere, but would return, another time, perhaps.<sup>3</sup>

Remaking old work is like taking a long stroll with a couple of companions, both of whom claim to be oneself - one a slack-arsed old geezer, the other a bitter young cock. They seem to have a lot to share, of which I understand almost nothing. I am busy, reading the map and forging the route while they spit words into each other's mouths. Occasionally we stumble upon a fresh experience, but they are blind and deaf to anything except their fevered pursuit of lost recall, "remember that one-armed beggar, outside Morris the Butcher, smeared his stump with off-cuts of meat and swallowed the coins..."<sup>4</sup>

I recognise the 7/8" drill bit used – 4 decades ago - for the 64 holes in the front panel of the *BOX*, but I can't remember what it felt like to be nineteen. I remember scenes: smoking cigarettes in a café's tearoom corner, filching amyl nitrate ampoules and laudanum solution – a *Red Harvest*, Dan Rolff fantasy - from my father's sea-going medicine chest. I remember wearing dark glasses, slippers and paint-spattered jeans. I remember believing that (perhaps) if I smoked enough dagga I could transcend identity and fear - that I was *almost* in touch with the *Zeitgeist* and the Collective Unconscious. I was sure that I would never hold down a job, own property, marry, breed or exist after death. I often thought that I was stuck in the present tense, but that was o.k., because time was a twist of flypaper. Somehow, I was confused by all this, and interpreted it to mean that I wanted to be an artist.

*This (Membrane) is What Comes Between Us*: I remember that the *BOX* was never about condoms but they did evoke premeditation and control, they were *sterile*, contradicting their obvious associations with sensuality and raw emotion.

In the late 1960s condoms were available, then as now, both to protect against sexually transmitted disease and to prevent unwanted pregnancy. They were sold from under the counter in pharmacies or man-to-man in barbershops - did one risk a knowing wink? There must have been a whole culture around the procurement of these devices. Confident purchase and use of the condom was one of many initiation rites separating Men from Boys (an Installation Rite for the Unattached Penis) and must have bred an epidemic of bad jokes, rumour, half-truth and wild expectation. It was only in the late 1990s, as part of the campaign to contain HIV-Aids, that condom manufacturers openly displayed their products on supermarket shelves, as commodities and lifestyle accessories.

Possession Art's first event in Johannesburg in 1983 included *Ms. van der Rohe/The Latex Palace* – a performance for radios & other domestic appliances: “on a summer's day a pubescent sighs, busy with an oxy-acetylene torch, burning a hole through an industrial block of ice while an older woman, a chanteuse of the sewing machine, sings lullabies, ripping & sewing yards of cloth; at the back of the stage a young man (as a penis) is held by a rig, thrusting forward like a ship's figurehead, a silver halo throbs - like a flying saucer - in a jet of air above his head; in release these elements wreck the *BOX*. Meanwhile, the artist switches radios on and off, and at the end sweeps debris from stage.”

*In 1967, I wanted to contaminate the cube and the grid.  
The map seemed suspect and the route obscure.*

Now the *BOX* is back. I can see it and hear it.

John Nankin

*BOX* 1967/75 (reproduction 2009)

(Perspex sheet & rod, glass, latex condoms<sup>5</sup>, silicone teats, silicone tubing, pump, timer)

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<sup>1</sup> title suggested by Ivor Powell

<sup>2</sup> from Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary

<sup>3</sup> I did not know that you had seen it, as shown in the photograph

<sup>4</sup> from a found scrap of text

<sup>5</sup> Prophylactics, Preservativos, French Letters, FLs, Effies, Rubbers, Gummies, Raincoats, Johnnies.

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