



**VISUAL CULTURE
AND PUBLIC MEMORY
IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA**

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HISTORY AFTER APARTHEID

An early project that was part of a series of creative workshops held on Robben Island attempted to explore some of the dynamics of the prison visit and to provide some idea of the experience of those on the other side of the visitor's grille. *Thirty Minutes* is a series of installations by nine artists who took over the bleak visitors' block. The artists produced individual installations in each of the visitor booths on the corridor. The "thirty minutes" of the title refers to the length of time allowed with the prisoner. How often these visits were permitted depended on what category the inmate was designated by the prison authorities.

Lionel Davis, himself an ex-prisoner and now one of the island personnel at RIM, confirms both Mlangeni's and Naidoo's accounts of visiting times on the island:

My art piece is from personal experience as a political prisoner on Robben Island [see figure 37]. The visiting booth, a confined impersonal space, gave no privacy. Bouncing off the walls all over that passage with its open visiting booths was a cacophony of sound — everyone shouting to be heard in different languages and very little to be heard. Every word spoken was carefully monitored by prison warder [sic]: a language not understood was summarily stopped and so was anything political. We had to confine ourselves to family matters and mundane affairs. In that booth every political prisoner appeared to be impotent — not the person the visitor had known yesterday. This, however, was deceptive. Every word spoken by a political prisoner was carefully calculated because a wrong word spoken or an angry outburst could mean the end of a long-awaited 6-monthly visit. Beyond the prison walls the fight against the atrocious treatment and appalling prison conditions continued unabatedly.¹⁴⁶

Appropriately, Davis's work recalls the babel he, Mlangeni, and Naidoo all describe as the precious thirty minutes they were able to spend in view of their loved ones.

For Cape Town artist Willie Bester the opportunity to participate in the *Thirty Minutes* exhibition was a moving and painful experience. Although his father had been imprisoned in Montague and had suffered similar abuses to the ones perpetrated on Robben Island — unable to wear long trousers, wearing sandals in winter, no bread or sugar to eat, and forced into unproductive labor — Bester's own experience of Robben Island was as a visitor to a common-law prisoner in 1975.¹⁴⁷ Bester's installation (shown in figure 38) consisted of a Bible wired as a bomb, with a white child's shoe in the center of the "semtex" base. He explains the hypocrisy of a religion claiming to be based on brotherly love between equals but systematically deployed to shore up the racial segregation that apartheid kept in place: "The



37. Lionel Davis, *Untitled*, 1997. Mixed media. Photo by Michael Hall. Courtesy of the artist.

Below 38. Willie Bester, *Die Bybel*, 1997. Steel, rubber, glass, found objects, resin, paper, 370 × 450 × 90 cm. Photo by Michael Hall. Courtesy of the artist.

