

NYPD Cues

By Alex Dodd

Writers often speak about characters coming to life inside their heads and steering the plot forward according to their own shadow imperatives. Perhaps a similar thing happens for artists when the internal logic governing one body of work mysteriously sparks the impulse or conceptual code for the next. Take what happened to Monique Pelser at the start of her recent eight-month Tierney Fellowship stint at the International Centre for Photography in New York. It's the kind of goose-bump inducing music of chance that could have come straight out of a Paul Auster novel. And it's not entirely lacking in his signature blend of absurdism, existentialism and crime fiction either...

The last work that Pelser showed in South Africa before leaving for New York last year was an extraordinary photographic and sound installation, entitled *Conversations with My Father*, which formed part of the group show [*Working Title*] at the Goodman Gallery in May 2012. In this searingly intimate work she grappled with the personal archive of her late father, who was a policeman. In it she tried to come to terms with his death, but also with the complexity of his life choices in becoming a member of the South African Police under apartheid and remaining part of the SAPS post-1994.

Fast forward a few months and she is finding her feet in Manhattan as part of five artists from around the world participating in the SVA's intensely immersive PhotoGlobal residency programme. At her first critique session, she presents her *Conversations with My Father* work, and the New Yorkers respond with the gob-smacking fact that the training academy of the New York Police Department happens to be in the building right next door to the art school. If you go up on to the roof of the SVA, they tell her, you can even see the rookie cops training in the courtyard down below. What's more, she discovers that this was the exact academy that her father visited in 1999 to do some research about community policing.

'I went next door and tried to chat to them,' she says. 'But it was almost impossible.' Being arguably one of the most hyper-mediated forces on planet earth (from *Kojak* to *Cagney & Lacey* to *Law & Order* and *NYPD Blue*, think of all the TV shows that have centred around the gritty details of life as a New York cop), the NYPD are particularly vigilant about their public image. This did not deter Pelser. After about a month of trying to seek permission, she spotted some 'white shirts' at a protest against police violence on Union Square, went straight up to them and started chatting. When she mentioned that her father was a cop, they finally began to open up to her and she started to gain access. 'They were great up until I mentioned filming or photographing,' she says.

After several months of observing the protocols and working around boundaries, she came across a society of retired police officers from the benevolence society, who were open to being filmed out of uniform, and her latest project has grown from there. 'I went to their monthly meetings and got

to know them,' she says. 'They were great. They drove me around Manhattan and Brooklyn and they got me ice hockey tickets, invited me into their homes and I got to know them quite well. So, by the time I filmed, we were just discussing what it means to be a police officer, the things one sees and how this job develops character and impacts on a person.'

So far, she has conducted seven interviews with both active and retired police officers and has been working with the New York-based film editor, Richard Pepperman, to develop her footage into short films. The policemen are featured out of their uniforms in their home environments – 'at the breakfast table, with their spouses, in their offices sitting in front of a wall of certificates and other regalia'. They narrate their stories in their own ways of telling, reflecting on the personal effects of dealing with intense human violence on a daily basis. The films have a colloquial, verité style with no obvious editorial intervention. This establishes an immediate intimacy between viewer and speaker, collapsing the usual distancing effect established by the uniform, which entrenches authority.

'What is captivating is how the characters shift their storytelling and body language when they are actively engaging with the camera,' says Pelser, who, in her larger oeuvre, employs consciously self-reflexive tactics to explore the social, mediated and archival effects of lens culture. 'They convey stories of violence and death and the way they perform the stories becomes a sign of how they cope.'

Now that she is back in Cape Town, Pelser hopes to continue this work in a South African context with the overall aim of making a feature documentary. 'My plan is to track down the cops my dad worked with and strike up conversations with them and see what comes of that,' she says.

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