

1ST AND 3RD

Simon Gush



'Have you looked at Simon Gush's work?' I ask the man seated next to me. It is late, nearly midnight. A dozen or so mismatched people sit huddled around a drinks table in a bar. The man next to me is slumped on a chair, drunk but undefeated by the march of the clock.

'No,' he replies, shaking his head. 'What does he do?'

I think about this for a moment. How should I reply? More importantly, why am I even thinking about Simon's deft, subtle art now, so late at night? Partly, it is his doing, the man seated next to me. It is because of him that I am here in this tiny university town; it was his idea to bring us – a group of would-be art historians, freelance theorists and art-interested writers – from all over the place to talk about new paradigms and other possibilities in art. That we all happen to live and work on the southern tip of the African continent gives our banter a particular inflection: imagine a conversation in English spoken with an unfamiliar accent.

Earlier in the day this tall, lean provocateur goaded us with an assertion: 'A moral seriousness has retarded art making in this country.' He was neither bitter nor contemptuous. It was just how this frustrated 'transnational citizen' had diagnosed the state of things in 'post-post-apartheid' South Africa. We're constipated, he added. Cowed by our history and disabled by a global lapse into irony, rather than being a free people, as we are so often reminded on radio and television, South Africans have become blocked up. Worse still, the country's artists have forgotten how to imagine, also how to wink, smile, and, tellingly, perhaps even laugh through their art. [I am, of course, improvising from memory here. It's late, nearing midnight. I don't have a notebook in front of me to verify these things.]

'Have you looked at Simon Gush's work?' I suddenly asked him, thinking of the imaginative wink and unaffected smile that distinguishes Simon's work.

'What does he do?' the man repeats. His interested eyes tell me that I am taking too long to reason through my response.

'Um, he organises soccer matches,' I state.

In 2007, shortly after he took up a residency at the Hoger Instituut van Schone Kunsten in Ghent, Simon Gush devised an action in which two teams of largely immigrant men played the beautiful game on an unlovely stretch of Belgian railway track. When he first told me about his plans to

make *In the Company of*, I was sceptical. Having both played and watched football since my early youth, I am cynical of outsiders – artists and intellectuals particularly – taking positions or making pronouncements on the game. I am not alone in this.

Writing about English literature's failure to credibly speak for or about football, author and critic DJ Taylor has commented: 'Novels about soccer tend to be written by educated gentlefolk who have observed the game from afar, while the cast of such works will necessarily be thick herberts, and [so] a certain amount of patronage, or rather distance between writer and raw material, is inevitable.' Substitute the word 'novels' with 'art' and Taylor's statement retains an internal logic and truth.

Of course, this is not a watertight argument. For starters, Simon can credibly argue distance is not an issue in his work. He is, after all, a fervent supporter of the legendary Soweto football club, Orlando Pirates. Furthermore, as a mark of his allegiance to his other favourite team, the city of Manchester's Red Devils, Simon is a paid-up member of the Manchester United Supporters Trust, a fan-based activist group that aims to secure a meaningful ownership stake in this world-famous football club. Fandom aside, Simon was also once a player. 'I was a right back for most of my not very promising career although I made a few appearances in the midfield and at right wing,' he once told me. 'Soccer is a great game to watch. It is incredibly tactical and physiological but one piece of luck or skill by an individual can change a whole game instantly. I always find it fascinating.'

There is a counter-argument. For the most part, football is an unfulfilled exercise in futility: 22 sweaty men run around a geometrically codified area of play chasing after a ball for 90 minutes, sometimes longer. The pantomime can often become dull. Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parenno understood this, which is why their meditative, singular observation of footballer Zinedine Zidane struck such a chord, even amongst football fans. *Zidane, a 21st century portrait* [2006] is obviously a reference point for *In the Company of*, concedes Simon, but then so too, albeit less apparently, is Marina Abramović.

'Although I would never call myself a performance artist, performance is a major part of my thinking around all of my work and always has been,' he stated in 2007. 'My experience of working with Marina Abramović during her show at the Johannesburg Art Gallery [in 2005] was perhaps a turning point for me. It was probably the most singularly influential show in terms

of my practice that I have worked on and certainly after that performance took on a more explicit position in my work.'

But it is football that is at issue here, at least for now. Similar to the Mexican artist Gustavo Artigas, whose action *The Rules of the Game* [2000-1] involved two San Diego basketball teams and two Tijuana football teams playing their respective ballgames, simultaneously, on the same playing field, *In the Company of* offers the sporting field as a terrain of difficulty. But why a railway line particularly? Early into the production of *In the Company of*, Simon remarked: 'Since arriving in Gent, I have found Belgium society very welcoming, although I am very aware of my own foreignness. As a result I have been drawn to areas largely inhabited by immigrants.'

Before leaving his birth country for Europe, Simon founded and managed a project space in Johannesburg's inner city. Known simply as the Parking Gallery, this tiny basement venue hosted 12 experimental exhibitions over the course of its six-month lifespan. Not long after it closed, the area in which the gallery had operated became a central flashpoint in the xenophobic violence that swept across the country in May 2008. These horrific events, in which local mobs attacked and murdered African immigrants, revealed just how much South Africans were struggling to embrace a newfound worldliness.

'My experience in inner city Johannesburg is crucial to how I relate to the world,' Simon remarked of this loaded context in our 2007 interview. 'It is an incredible place to live. On the other hand, I am a white African and foreign everywhere. However, I think these kinds of discussions are not central to my work in that I feel much of the debate around immigrants in South Africa needs to be placed in a more global context of growing xenophobia worldwide.'

For an artist searching out 'ways to rephrase political questions in ways that simulate a different discussion', football offers a supple means to get to this pointed end. Contemporary professional football embodies many of the central contradictions of twenty-first century capitalism. Highly reliant on a skilled labour market, it demands labour fluidity and mobility, this in the face of increasingly stringent national immigration laws. Football is also propped by a system of speculative financing and is marked by a high degree of indebtedness. What was once referred to as team loyalty has in recent years been commoditised and redefined as brand loyalty. To simplify, football has come a long way since a group of coachbuilders and railway men

from the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company decided to found a football club that, over time, would morph into the transnational football giant Manchester United.

It is a similarly big leap from the football pitch to the concert hall, from Ryan Giggs [Simon's favourite footballer as a youth] to the composer Sergei Prokofiev. Perhaps less discontinuous is Simon's interest in the creative output of Russia's post-revolution avant-garde. Although geographically distant, Russian creativity has loomed large in the mind of South African artists and writers. Author JM Coetzee is perhaps the most explicit in his admiration of Russia's great tradition, having written critical essays on Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. William Kentridge meanwhile has been guided and influenced by the work of avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov and nineteenth century absurdist writer Nikolai Gogol, recently presenting an adaptation of Shostakovich's *The Nose* [1930] in New York. Shostakovich disliked Prokofiev, who is still remembered as too much in tow of Stalin. Not so, argues the literary essayist Algis Valiunas: 'Prokofiev could wield an irony so delicate and unobtrusive it breezed right past the inspectorate.' Delicate and unobtrusive – these are useful words for appreciating Simon's provocative situation-based performances and installations. To which I would also add the following: subtle, restrained, deadpan, allusive and, yes, winking.

In his quest to determine and shape a 'contemporary language for politics in art', one that isn't indebted to old orthodoxies and rote practices, Simon has managed to draw high praise from a notoriously laconic commentator. The conceptual artist Joachim Schonfeldt has repeatedly told me that Simon's work offers a lone beacon of hope for new South African art. Simon is however by no means *sui generis*. Like Cape Town artist James Webb and French-Moroccan artist Latifa Echakhch, both highly mobile artists, Simon's work exhibits an acute sense of what it means to think and act politically. In Simon's case, he achieves this by devising absurd visuals conundrums that hint at how the ostensibly apolitical – football, dancing, even composing – are shaped by larger, contextual political concerns.

It is the morning after our big night out. The man I'd been seated next to at the bar has bloodshot eyes and dishevelled hair. As he ushers us into the hall for round two, he ushers me aside. 'What was the name of that artist you mentioned last night?'



This publication appears on the occasion of the exhibition:

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21.04.2010 – 29.05.2010

Text: Sean O'Toole, writer and editor of the journal Art South Africa
Image: In the Company Of, 2008, Simon Gush, Photo: Marie Snauwaert
Thanks: Gemeente Den Haag, ISBN: 978-90-79917-06-8

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