



UNCOMMON GROUND

WHILE ON A RECENT VISIT TO CHILE, SIMON GUSH CHATTED WITH **PHILIPPE VAN CAUTEREN** AND **THOMAS CARON**, OF BELGIUM'S SMAK MUSEUM IN GHENT, ABOUT LATITUDES, TAKING POSITIONS AND SLOWING DOWN THE CONSUMPTION OF ART

Simon Gush is *Art South Africa's* eleventh and final Bright Young Thing for 2007

Philippe Van Cauteren: Santiago is on the same latitude as South Africa. I mention this because, in your work, you are investigating contexts, environments or situations. How do you perceive Santiago?

Simon Gush: I find it difficult to make general statements about Santiago. I am reluctant to comment after such a short time.

PVC: However, your site-specific action in Kolkatta, India, *Moving House* (2006), which was also produced during a short period of time, could be read as a comment on that context. You specifically chose the Chaudhuri Bari as your location and hired seven bicycle rickshaws to try to pull the building forward.

SG: I was interested in exploring the question of working in a foreign context. I think that when an artist does this there is a transaction that takes place whereby s/he often takes more than s/he gives. The experience of riding in the rickshaws in India was interesting for me in relation to this because the drivers have their own power, in the sense that they are unionised and therefore have agency. But even if one is aware of this, one is still paying to be pulled along by another human being. I found it very uncomfortable. I wanted to somehow expose this kind of feeling. The work, *Moving House*, is as much about the hiring of the rickshaws as it is about them actually trying to pull the house forward.

PVC: Artists from Chile are often connected to history of Pinochet's dictatorship or the genealogy of Chilean contemporary art. As a young artist with a particular relationship to apartheid, how does the political history of your country affect you in positioning yourself as an artist in other contexts?

SG: Since moving to Europe, I have been more aware of the extent to which growing up in South Africa has defined how I approach the world. Having said this, I don't want to be seen as a South African artist exclusively. I think this label has too much of an effect on the manner in which a non-South African audience reads the work. I try to avoid this because the viewer tends to rely on preconceived ideas when interacting with a piece.

Thomas Caron: But can you distance yourself from being South African when the subject matter of your work is involved in having grown up in this context? For example, your interests in power relationships?

SG: I think that it is important that South Africans start to position their discussions in a more global context and to participate in broader discussions. The things I am interested in don't only exist in South Africa.

TC: Is it possible to transport these issues to a global level when they are always very context specific?

SG: I don't feel that when I am working in Belgium, Chile or India that my issues are South Africa specific. My aim is to try to avoid generalisations by examining how particular details in different situations might contribute to a larger debate.

PVC: In one of our earlier discussions, you were the only participant to say that an artist should take a position. How do you position yourself as an artist and how do you see the position of the artist in general?

SG: I don't try to take a static or overriding position but I do think

that there is a need for artists to take some responsibility for the system in which they have chosen to work. As an artist, one has agency and a voice along with access to a public. In relation to the market, for instance, I don't feel I am outside of it. Artworks that are openly critical of the market are often rapidly absorbed into it, for example the work of Santiago Sierra. I think the art market is a reflection of global capitalism. The latter's power is mirrored in the strength of the market. I feel I have a responsibility to act within it to try to slow down the consumption of the art I produce. I would like it if there was a way of withholding something in the work, so that there is a part that can't be bought and sold.

TC: But how does your action *21 Gun Salute for the Death of A Collector* (2007) resist the market? You are selling something, in this case a 21-gun salute that can only occur once the collector has died.

SG: The work is part of the market and designed accordingly. There is a literal withholding of the work in the sense that the collector can only have the work after s/he dies. But more importantly, it proposes a different relationship with the collector. The certificate that contains both of our details links us. Therefore, I have to take responsibility for my association with the collector and s/he must take on a different responsibility to the work. The collector is legally bound not to sell the work until after the completion of the performance. It therefore cannot be an investment for the collector's personal gain during his lifetime.

PVC: In a way, I think that many artists hide behind their work. I have the impression that you are not hiding behind your work but standing next to it. It is a very different approach to the things you make as an artist.

SG: I always try and implicate myself in my practice and, on some level, the audience too. For instance, in my piece with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, *3 Point Turn* (2007), I try to make the audience take responsibility for participating in the piece, even though their role is to play spectator to Sam Matentji, a former minibus-taxi driver, doing a three-point turn and driving up a busy one way road. The action was viewed from the balcony of the Point Blank Gallery as well as the people in the street that day. It was not comfortable to watch.

I think these ideas are not unrelated to Philippe's concept, which at first might seem naïve, of attempting to make a manifesto in the 21st century. The whole process demands complicated questions about our ability to engage with politics. It makes an attempt to take some positive action, even though one goes in with the knowledge that there may well no be any concrete results from it. It was about process.

Philippe Van Cauteren is artistic director of SMAK, the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent, Belgium; Thomas Caron is curator at SMAK

About Simon Gush: Born in Pietermaritzburg (1981), Gush completed his BFA at Wits (2003). Currently a Candidate-Laureate at the Hoger Instituut van Schone Kunsten (HISK) in Ghent, Belgium, he recently held his first commercial exhibition, *Salute*, at Michael Stevenson Gallery. Founder and curator of the Parking Gallery, a temporary project space on Pritchard Street, Johannesburg, he has participated on numerous group exhibitions, including *Out of Place*, *Open Archive # 1*, at Argos in Brussels, and *Preview*, at the Point Blank Gallery, Johannesburg (2005).

This is an edited version of a discussion held in Santiago, Chile on October 30, 2007, during the preparation of the exhibition *El Manifiesto de Santiago/ Das Santiago-Manifest*, initiated by Philippe Van Cauteren at the Matucana 100 cultural centre. The project attempted to write a manifesto as its major focus and included Gush as a participant. For further information: www.m100.cl

Simon Gush and Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, *3 Point Turn*, 2007, realised by Sam Matentji. Point Blank Gallery / Twist Street, Drill Hall, Johannesburg