

Cutting-Edge Humour

Young conceptual artist is making waves with his playful approach in which performance plays an important role.

In case you haven't been following, here are a few highlights from Simon Gush's youthful career. In March 2005, he installed four rotating ceiling fans in the Drill Hall in Jo'burg's inner city. The fans were mounted very low with the blades rotating just above visitors' heads.

Gush, a Wits Fine Art graduate, used fans again in a work shown last year. The work entitled *Perfect Lovers*, a tribute to the deceased Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzales-Torres, involved two fans installed dangerously close to one another with their blades almost touching.

Earlier this year, shortly before departing for a two-year postgraduate stint in Ghent, Belgium, Gush orchestrated another of his threateningly funny action pieces.

For *Three-Point Turn*, Gush briefed a former minibus-taxi driver, Sam Matentji, to do a stunt performance on Twist Street, just outside the Drill Hall, across the road from one of the city's most congested taxi ranks. Driving a van christened Ihashi Lemohlophe ("white horse" in Xhosa), Matentji did a three-point turn in front of the gallery and drove headlong into oncoming traffic on the one-way.

In an e-mail conversation with Gush, in Chile at the time for a project, I ask the 26-year-old about the Parking Gallery, a tiny basement project space he founded on Pritchard Street. During its brief life it hosted, among others, a quirky performance involving marathon runners – the action was overseen by friend and sometimes collaborator, artist Dorothee Kreutzfeldt.

"It was a conceptual response to a situation," says Gush. "The Parking Gallery, as separate to my own practice, was a backdrop to a conversation I was quietly having with what was happening in Jo'burg: what kind of work gets shown, how it is presented, how it is possible to do your own thing without waiting for institutions to come and pick you up, and just the need for diversity in the art scene."

The South African scene is quite conservative, says Gush, his gallery positioned as both implied critique and viable alternative. He credits installation and logistics expert Bie Venter with playing an important role in shaping his thinking. "I have often said I learnt more from working with Bie than I learnt in four years at Wits. That is not to say Wits is bad, it is just that working professionally as a technician gave me the chance to really see how people approach space in a general sense."

A brief period assisting renowned performance artist Marina Abramovic, who in 2005 staged an action at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, was also influential on his early practice. "Performance, although I would never call myself a performance artist, is a major part of my thinking around all of my work and always has been. It (Abramovic's show) was probably the singularly most 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."

A recent work exhibited at Michael Stevenson in Cape Town, highlights Gush's ongoing interest in performance. Titled *21 Gun Salute for the Death of a Collector*, the work is exactly what the name implies, a chorus of 21 gunshots to mark the death of its owner. It owes a debt to Gonzales-Torres, earlier this year the subject of a survey show at the Venice Biennale. The exhibition included his famous paper stacks, which invite audiences to remove single sheets of duplicate prints. "His pieces are incredibly interesting in relation to the market," says Gush.

Although anyone can potentially own a facsimile of a Gonzales-Torres work, legal of the work is distinguishable by a certificate.

Gush's gun salute piece employs a similar tack, the promise of a future action accompanied by a detailed legal document. He is careful not to overstate the implied subversion of his action-based works, which often lack any fixed commodity.

"Artworks that are openly critical of capitalism, for example the work of Santaigo Sierra, are often rapidly absorbed into it," he says. "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. And I don't mean dematerialising the art object or any of those kinds of strategies. We all know that concepts are regularly bought and sold".