



A blind man's stick

SEAN O'TOOLE

BIOGRAPHY

Sean O'Toole is a culture journalist, art critic and writer. A Ph.D candidate at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, he formerly served as editor of the magazine *Art South Africa* (2004-2010), writes a bi-monthly art column for *frieze* magazine and is a regular contributor to the *Sunday Times*.

At their most aware, they [magazines] reflect the qualities or weaknesses of their societies; at their blindest, they are showcases for the imbecilities of their editors.
Rajat Neogy (1966:21)

→ **That art criticism** still matters, or at least the idea of published criticism as a necessary and desired form of public dialogue, was again emphasised to me recently following the publication of a generally unfavourable review of a prominent national exhibition in *Art South Africa*, the quarterly print magazine I edited for six years (2006-2010). While Gerhard Schoeman's review of the exhibition *1910-2010: From Pierneef to Gugulective*, a large-scale survey exhibition of South African art originated and hosted by the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, is a matter of public record, the processes that informed the writer's appointment and the subsequent reception of his words are, perhaps, less known. Although potentially banal and lacklustre, there is nonetheless insight to be gained from discussing this minutia: it offers an insight into how cultural discourse is manufactured, received and reproduced in South Africa.

Founded in 2002 by publisher Brendon Bell-Roberts, *Art South Africa* is a non-affiliated, independently published quarterly print magazine focussed, principally, on contemporary South African art. Since its inception, *Art South Africa* has been run as a commercial business venture, the magazine being reliant entirely on advertising and retail sales for its existence. But for the editor – there have been three since the magazine launched, Sophie Perryer, the founding editor, whom I succeeded, and my successor, Bronwyn Law-Viljoen – *Art South Africa* has no permanent staff, and the design is handled by the publisher (either personally or by staff at his contract publishing company). Diagrammatically, *Art South Africa* is probably best likened to an atom: a small, dense nucleus surrounded by a constellation of satellite energies. Principal amongst these energies are the magazine's writers, a loose network of art-interested specialists and generalists, including artists, art historians, architects, curators, essayists, filmmakers, journalists, novelists and poets. Their writings fill three architecturally discrete spaces: a news and opinion section upfront, a reviews section at back, and a middle section devoted to essay-length analyses of individual practitioners, collective national trends, noteworthy debates and, sometimes, key exhibitions. In 2005, the magazine dedicated significant editorial space to the exhibition *Picasso and Africa*, in particular Department of Arts and Culture spokesman Sandile Memela's (2006:12) assertion that Picasso's "creative genius" was founded on his theft and re-adaption of the work of anonymous African artists. More recently, responding to a large number of group exhibitions timed to coincide with the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the magazine included lengthy reviews of these shows, in both the June and September 2010 editions. It was in the June edition that the aforementioned Cape Town show received star billing.

Curated by Riason Naidoo, the recently appointed director of the South African National Gallery and Old Town House, 1910-2010: *From Pierneef to Gugulective* opened to the general public on April 15, 2010 – three weeks before the print deadline for the June 2010 edition of *Art South Africa*. Finding a reviewer to penetratingly cover the exhibition in the short space of time available was obvious from the get go (never mind that the *New York Times* and *Guardian* routinely feature insightful reviews of the Venice Biennale, for example, a day or so after its opening). Personally impressed by the exhibition's episodic, sprawling character; its quiet spotlighting of previously overlooked practitioners from KwaZulu-Natal; and,

importantly, its flattening of the hierarchies that have come to define the South African art canon, I decided to allocate 1250 words to the National Gallery show. A professional fee was set at R2500. As a sweetener, I decided to offer the potential writer the draw of feature article billing (in the event, Schoeman's article became the cover story). After being turned down by a Senior Lecturer at the University of Cape Town, and mindful of Naidoo's request that the magazine forgo journalistic essaying in favour of academic rigour and discursive argument, this during an unpublished speech he presented at the magazine's seventh birthday party in late 2009, I approached Gerhard Schoeman, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art History and Visual Culture Studies at the University of the Free State. A regular contributor to the magazine, Schoeman has in the past written insightful feature-length articles on South African artists, Willem Boshoff and Neil Goedhals, the latter prompting a letter to the editor challenging Schoeman's "orthodox view" of Goedhals as "a heroic nihilist" (Nankin 2008:28). A generally non-partisan reviewer, Schoeman is both scrupulous and forthright as a scholar; crucially, he has also never reneged on a deadline.

"Any chance you would be interested in reviewing a big show in Cape Town for a feature?" I wrote in an email to Schoeman (O'Toole 2010/04/22). "We can't fly you down, but since it would be slotted into the features section and form part of a composite engagement with new large-scale exhibitions, I presume your research fund might cover the logistical expense". Sure, he replied. And that, more or less, was that – my brief was no more complicated or directed than that. My next email to Schoeman (O'Toole 2010/05/04) sent the day before his submission deadline, was pithy: "I hope your trip down to Cape Town went well. I write to confirm that the review is on track for tomorrow morning". It was.

On May 27, shortly after receiving advance copies of the June 2010 edition of *Art South Africa*, the publisher and I attended a presentation by a marketing company involved in promoting the magazine to potential corporate advertisers – a more lucrative and reliable tier of patron than private galleries, whose generosity has nonetheless largely sustained the magazine to date. It was here that I presented Naidoo with a courtesy copy of the magazine, in which Schoeman (2010:56-59) dismissed his exhibition's "clutter", lapses into "disingenuous platitudes" and lack of a "lucid theme". After briefly scanning Schoeman's write-up, Naidoo and I discussed the partisan reception of his debut

curatorial initiative in his new position; the ongoing white hegemony over culture and its debate locally; the role of *Art South Africa* in challenging this status quo; the paucity of black art critics and art historians in South Africa; the reality of print deadlines; and, necessarily, the legitimacy of the appointed writer. It was a terse, at times blunt exchange.

On July 8, I had occasion to lead a visiting British magazine editor on a tour of Naidoo's exhibition. Afterwards, we attended a luncheon with, amongst others, Justice Albie Sachs, who, as it happened, spent some time discussing the rough ride Naidoo's show had received at the hands of the press, notably Lloyd Pollak's *South African Art Times* review (2010:1-2). Sachs, whose interest in the visual arts predates his famous 1989 polemic 'Preparing ourselves for freedom' and includes the publication of the handbook, *Images of a revolution: Mural art in Mozambique* (1983), mentioned a telephone call he had received from Naidoo concerning Pollak's review. Sachs was both diplomatic and sage in his advice, suggesting to the new director that he display Pollak's review publically. Naidoo duly did, placing it adjacent to a favourable notice that appeared in the *Mail & Guardian* (May 20 2010). As I waited for my guest at the entrance to the National Gallery, what struck me about these two reviews was not their opinion (for or against the show) but their size. Is this all there is to say about an exhibition occupying the entirety of the only municipal gallery straddled with the title 'national' in its public name, a show spanning a full century of the republic's life? In the event, the answer was no.

On the eve of the exhibition's closure in September, Naidoo sent out a group email inviting a range of art world personalities (amongst them art administrators, artists, curators, art historians and critics) to participate in "panel discussions to mark the end of the exhibition" (Naidoo 2010/09/14). Hosted by the Iziko South African National Gallery and held over two days (October 1-2), the untitled series of panel discussions progressed with the mock seriousness of political trial. Demonstrating welcome lightness and agility in her unscripted presentation, this in distinction to the rhetorical showmanship and grandstanding employed by many of the speakers, curator Gabi Ngcobo (2010), in a session titled 'Curating – new ways of seeing', asked, "What do we want art museums to be?" She further added, "The ideal museum is permanently under construction all over the world". Very few of the participating speakers, however, were able to achieve Ngcobo's unrehearsed equanimity. While it

is possible to snippily dismiss the two-day panel discussions as an opportunist gambit by Naidoo aimed at shaping a more sympathetic discourse around his first attempt in his new position, the event was not without insight or import. On the second day of the proceedings, October 2, in a panel titled 'Art criticism and the media: Sticks and stones?', both Schoeman and Pollak were invited to speak, in effect, to defend their reviews. This is noteworthy.

Amongst the more routine comments I hear about South African art criticism is that it is 'mawkish', 'tame', 'insipid', 'promotional', 'unsophisticated', 'dumb' and 'irrelevant'. And yet, as is evidenced in the extended anecdote that delivered us to this point, critical commentary still matters. This is particularly pronounced in the visual arts. Why? "Images without text are embarrassing, like a naked person in a public space" ventures Boris Groys, a Professor of Aesthetics, Art History and Media Theory in Karlsruhe, Germany, in a 1997 *Artforum* interview, republished in his book *Art power* (2008:111). "At the very least they need a textual bikini" adds Groys. This necessarily casts the critic as a clothier, perhaps even as tailor or couturier, or simply as a checkout assistant at a discount retailer. While Groys is an adept rib-tickler, he is sanguine about the awkward place of criticism in contemporary culture. Art commentary, Groys (2008:111) offers,

finds itself today in a confusing position, at once indispensable and superfluous. Other than its sheer material presence, one doesn't really know what to expect of it or desire from it. This confusion is rooted in the rise of contemporary criticism: the positioning of the critic within the art world is anything but self-evident.

Ever since reading this passage I have felt an awkward sense of purposelessness. It is by no means a unique anxiety. "What do we do?" asks Samuel Beckett's character Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* (1952). "Don't let's do anything" responds Estragon. "It's safer". Purposelessness, as Beckett suggests, is often twinned with routine and habit. It's safer. In the tiny universe of art criticism, this logic reveals itself in the calcified formalism that characterises much writing about art. In a world where the positioning of the critic is anything but self-evident, a necessarily fluid and potentially dynamic space to be working in, most critics appear happy to lapse into rote exercises in evisceration and autopsy. For the most part, it cannot be otherwise: editors are, for the most part, bound by routine and habit. They like the words and thoughts

they gather embalmed in certain recognisable ways. It's safer. I am, of course, being provocative and cynical.

Beckett isn't the only writer to recognise that humour is intimately connected to cynicism. In a 2008 article published in *The Guardian*, art critic Adrian Searle, cynically and humorously, remarked on the rhetorical nature of debates about the crisis in art criticism. "I have found myself talking about the topic in London, Madrid, Berlin and Miami" writes Searle (2008:23). "These debates have become an occupational hazard – but they also pay well. If I had known there was money in it, I would have invented a crisis myself" (Searle 2008:21). In a similarly considered piece of writing about the place of formal film criticism as bloggers replace professional critics, *New York Times* film critic Anthony Oliver Scott (2010:AR1) also highlighted the rhetorical nature of "the death of criticism" debate; he traces the discontent back as far as the early nineteenth-century. Scott's conclusion to his extended op-ed (there was no film being reviewed) is germane to the route of my argument here. "The future of criticism is the same as it ever was" Scott (2010:AR1) writes. "Miserable, and full of possibility. The world is always falling down. The news is always very sad. The time is always late. But the fruit is always ripe" (Scott 2010:AR1).

What, though, does this contextual detail have to do with the particularities of an unfavourable review published in a specialist art magazine targeted, primarily, at South African readers? Everything, especially if you consider the embattled space of art writing globally and the myriad privileges its consumption implies, especially locally. The word privilege is key and cues a number of forthright questions. Who consumes art writing? Why? And, to what ends? These questions are by no means rhetorical and demand scrutiny. Equally deserving of exegesis is the term 'art criticism', a catchall phrase that bounds a strangely diffuse practice marked by a plurality of forms,

histories and protagonists. Such an enquiry will, of necessity, have to answer some key questions. What is art criticism's history in South Africa? How has it been refined and propelled forward by specialist art and culture publications such *Brandwag*, *Lantern*, *Fontein*, *The Classic*, *Artlook*, *De Arte*, *Staffrider*, *Ventilator*, *Artthrob.co.za*, *Chimurenga* and *Art South Africa*? And, given the historical timeframe that bounds this writing, a timeframe roughly contiguous with that of the National Gallery show, 1910 to 2010, what is the ideological context and character of this criticism? How has it functioned to buttress and support, or critique and detonate the larger narratives of nationhood that form part of, and infiltrate (consciously or not) the ecology of meaning?

I don't intend to answer any of these questions, some of which have already been incisively tackled by writers. I do, however, wish to offer one totalising rejoinder to all these open-ended interrogatives: fundamentally, writing is about risk. There is risk in orchestrating words into sentences and paragraphs, and, by so doing, marshalling the chaos of experience into thought. Compounding the risk is the notionally immutable character of words once published. At its best, published criticism can be a sharp blade, an Occam's razor; at its worst, it is little better than a gnarled knobkerrie, a vengeful club. In 1966, Rajat Neogy (1966:16), the Ugandan-born founder of the pan-African literary journal *Transition*, who I quote appreciatively at the outset, asked a simple question: "Do magazines culture?" Yes, he argued, offering in his essay a simple metaphor to account for the role and purpose of magazines committed to furthering cultural debate. They are, he said, like "a blind man's stick" (Neogy 1966:16). In other words, they can function as an aid to seeing, but can never substitute for the act of looking. Sometimes, at their best, magazines can also be useful tools for – slowly, tentatively – finding the way forward.

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