

Missed the show, missed the point.

By Rupert England

It is with faint amusement that I followed the *ArtThrob* (none-) coverage of City+Suburban's 24/7 Residency Programme at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Sean O'Toole's subsequent review of *art as usual* (the exhibition of evidence of the 24/7 programme) was, frankly, an outrage. In the article, entitled "Monkey's masquerading as Guerrillas", Sean O'Toole infers that the shows were not as advertised, also making it abundantly obvious that he completely missed the point - judging the exhibition by a set of criteria that he manufactured.

Firstly, it should be known that Sean O'Toole offered to write weekly updates for the duration of the event - this was advertised on the event flyer and on various websites. However, Sean O'Toole did not deliver and sadly reneged on his word. Instead, almost immediately after personally opening the show, Sean O'Toole left the country on a business trip (to attend a medical conference in Europe on behalf of his father). Having missed the event, the self-styled critic returned to the Johannesburg Art Gallery for the exhibition of evidence, "Being one of those inquisitive enough to go (and) view the show".

It seems to many that on the occasion of Sean O'Toole's visit, he had his hands over his eyes - mimicking a member of that famous trio of monkeys. He wrote: "All I encountered was a purposefully composed, near derelict space; a series of empty frames; broken chairs; and an angry riposte aimed at one curator while exonerating another." Assuming Sean O'Toole did not have his hands over his eyes, how did he fail to notice several VHS cassettes exhibited in a glass cabinet? It seems Mr O'Toole was expecting to be spoon-fed all the work produced and was obviously deeply disappointed when Christian Nerf failed to present a neatly bound press pack holding written notes - with a CD-Rom containing the body of work. To use the parlance of the times: sorry for you Sean O'Toole.

It is a trifle difficult understanding Mr O'Toole's verbose waffle, but upon the third re-read of his article, I came to understand that Sean O'Toole felt the exhibition was not the evidence promised by the curator, Christian Nerf. I openly invite Sean O'Toole to define 'evidence'. A pile of VHS tapes containing live video recordings of seven

weeks of work-in-progress would be accepted as evidence in a court of law – but not in the court of O’Toole. Of course, the proof is in the watching - but VHS tapes are evidence nonetheless.

The concept of *24/7* was the process, watching artists and artistes produce art, live. This much Sean O’Toole did grasp - but wasn’t able to appreciate *art as usual* in the context of *24/7*, probably because he did not set foot in the gallery after week one (until the last couple of days). He labelled Kathryn Smith’s tattooing as the highlight of the show. This is nothing more than presumption since, as stated previously, the editor of *ArtThrob* did not bare witness too much else. You see Sean, in the world of art there is no “undisputed” champion: what is a highlight to a monkey may well be the lowlight to a guerrilla.

Sean O’Toole’s comment about Ed Young getting drunk was pathetic:

”If process over product means having to watch Ed Young getting drunk, I remain unconvinced. This is by no means a personal gripe against the Cape Town artist; Ed Young has promising future and whisky is a noble drink.” A very clever statement (a pity it’s a borrowed simulation), but so fucking what if Ed Young got drunk on whisky – that was never advertised as a performance and is entirely irrelevant to either *24/7* or *art as usual*. Who got drunk and who did what to who is usually reserved for the gossip columns (maybe there is a future for the ‘writer’ after all). A review of Ed Young’s actual performance piece would have been a little more suitable - but quite impossible when the so-called critic was not around to witness the collaboration between Ed Young, Andrew Lamprecht and others.

Anis Nin wrote: “We do not see things how they are, we see things how we are”. Accordingly, what some saw as a derelict space others saw as a hive of activity for seven weeks. And what some saw as broken frames others saw as a fragment of something much, much bigger. It is in fact disgusting that a so-called critic made no mention of several VHS cassettes containing hours of active participation by over 50 artists. No, Sean O’Toole arrived at the end of the gig, saw the cigarette butts and paper cups as ‘evidence’ – and had the audacity to write about the exhibition as you would a traditional exhibition of oil paintings.

Sean O’Toole’s review of *art as usual* was as ridiculous as a rock critic arriving at the end of a 7-week concert, not seeing an unpackaged CD recording of the show and

lambasting the gig. It is utterly absurd to even have an opinion about the evidence of an event that you did not attend. Particularly when Sean O'Toole failed to view *art as usual* within the context of *24/7*. I am fortunate enough to have viewed much of the video evidence: over 50 artists creating countless artworks. So much for "pop and fizzle" - can Sean O'Toole recall such a substantial body of work being produced by so many artists in such a short space of time? In terms of concept and scale, *24/7* is without equal. Of course, Sean O'Toole had a pre-conceived idea of *art as usual* - thinking it was going to be an exhibition of all the work produced over 7 weeks - and got very upset when the curator didn't provide him with the obvious.

The glaring question is why Sean O'Toole is actually writing about South African art at all. Until recently, Sean O'Toole was compiling the monthly SL magazine CD. Now, a year later, the same person is presenting himself as a South African art critic. What qualification does Sean O' Toole possess that he considers himself a critic of the arts? There is no bachelor degree, no honouree doctorate; there is not even a matric exemption in the subject. Quotes garnered from here and there do not constitute expertise - even monkeys and guerrillas know that. In reality, Sean O'Toole's criticism is nothing more than subjective and pompous trite masquerading as critical opinion. Where is the journalistic integrity in judging an event while making no attempt at understanding it? Why even commentate about a subject matter about which you know precious little? Of course, the review is in fact laughable, and most artists that took part in the programme agree. Granted, Mr O'Toole uses high falutan language to say nothing much - but no number of syllables make-up for an utter lack of substance and style. Criticism is an important aspect of any civilized society, but Sean O'Toole is nothing more than a guerrilla beating his chest with a thesaurus.