

DOUGLAS GIMBERG AND CHRISTIAN NERF

One more day to regret, Escape to Robben Island



Photo credit: Crispian Plunkett

When all you have's a hammer
All you see is nails
When all you have's a hammer
And when all else fails
Hit the nails!¹

On the 9th of May, 2008, Douglas Gimberg, Christian Nerf and their passenger, the multitalented yo-yo artist Barend de Wet, allegedly launched off the shores of mainland Cape Town in their recently completed, small, wooden boat, the *angasi nkosi, angasi nkosi*² and rowed their way to Robben Island. The trio were refused entry on arrival despite attempts to convince the security guards that they were there to see a friend who worked at the Robben Island museum and then, desperately, that they had come to see Robben Island, the “university”.³ They were instructed to take their boat and leave, which they did.

Escape to Robben Island, 2008, is in many ways the climax of Gimberg and Nerf’s year long collaboration which began on the 21st of March in 2007 with the somewhat austere brief ‘Build a boat, grow a beard’. Their overall project encompasses various exhibitions, events, interventions and intercessions, such as *planting an apple tree in Paradise* (an area of Knysna), translating Anton Szandor La Vey’s *Satanic Bible* into Afrikaans and inviting viewers to engage in seemingly light hearted acts of desecration at their 2007 exhibition *Carpentry 101*. A similar scene of axe wielding viewers was reenacted at the *Real Fuckup* on the night of the 9th of May, 2008, at Kwa Mlami in Gugulethu – in the backyard of a local pub where the artists had been on residency for the last month or so of their boat building exploits, viewers crowded around the *angasi nkosi, angasi nkosi* which was propped, belly up, in the damp sand. Beers in hand were passed temporarily to bystanders as viewers took turns to hack at the demarcated area of the boat with a bright orange axe. Despite the frenzy that

¹Lyric excerpt from the song Parasight by Entombed, from the album *To Ride, Shoot Straight and Speak the Truth* (1997).

² *Angasi* ‘I don’t know’, *nkosi* ‘chief’, ‘boss’, ‘god’ or basically any higher force. The phrase provides a Zulu translation of ‘*ni dieu ni maître!*’, neither God nor master, coined by the socialist Auguste Blanqui in 1880, when he published a journal by that name. It became an anarchist slogan and was later used as a title for an anthology of anarchist writings edited by Daniel Guérin, the New York Street Punk bands Choking Victim and Left Over Crack have recently adapted the phrase in the form of ‘no gods, no managers’.

³The Robben Island prison has been retrospectively referred to as “our university” by former political prisoners who felt that the interaction between the inmates had provided them and their cause with an unprecedented opportunity to learn from and educate each other. See Williamson, S. (ed.) 1997. *Thirty Minutes: Installations by nine artists*. Cape Town: Robben Island Museum. (Catalogue for an exhibition held at Robben Island Museum, October 1997).

seemed to be building up the viewers eventually lost interest and turned back to the music and the bar, leaving the boat, with its gaping hole, to no longer be mistaken for a boat.⁴

With the broken boat like structure lying starkly in the centre of the Association for Visual Arts in Cape Town and the unsuccessful escape to Robben Island realized, one understandably anticipates that the whole saga is drawing to a close and that the artists will begin to account for the various discrepancies that have marred their project from its inception. The resolution that the final exhibition provides will however do more to complicate and confuse the unapparent trajectory of the project than resolve it – not one scrap of concrete evidence will be shown, the testimony of the only passenger (available on the Studio 2666 blog) is discredited by the inclusion of a fake image of De Wet, black and white table mountain scene in the background, sea spray in the fore, a generic image that could be substituted by many others, taken of various individuals throughout the process of the project. The dramatism of the ‘escape’, the act of escaping to rather than from a former prison, provides a fairly swallowable, if not witty reversal, and at first glance the various aspects of Gimberg and Nerf’s project seem suitably above board (the boat and the beards at least are visible at face value). Building and rowing a boat to Robben Island is a fairly rational medium of comment on the gentrified dream of so many South Africans who obsess about ‘going overseas’ to find themselves, their riches or simply escape the presumably claustrophobic local art scene. Yet the various snippets of information that Gimberg and Nerf release, titles, letters, statistics, references, images, invitations, combined with blatantly posed and faked photographs do little to support this meager justification.

Any concerted attempt to understand the links between the various divergent processes that compose the overall project is at once obstructed by this lack of legitimate rationale. As the various discrepancies are revealed it becomes evident that in the place of a well explained motivation the artists have instead constructed a convoluted web of ambiguous associations, exploited coincidences, breached narratives and dead-end clues. This obstruction, a series of intentionally unfilled gaps that spoil the possibilities of confident comprehension, immediately instigates a flurry of interpretive responses.

One of the easier interpretive alternatives would be to simply deny a rationale altogether and frame Gimberg and Nerf’s undertakings as indulgent adventures, Scooby Doo type mysteries that dabble with the dark arts and the deep seas; playful pursuits that

⁴ The destruction of the *angasi nkosi*, *angasi nkosi* was planned from the outset of the project; the *Real fuckup* partially realized the damage that over fifty previous participants had inflicted on the boat’s maquette at *Fuckup* (the boat’s ‘formative transformation’ at the *Upstairs/Downstairs* exhibition, April 1st 2007).

amicably expose the futility of art to those who take it all too seriously. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your personal predilection, this projective vision of two men showing off the evidence of their various maritime, horticultural, destructive and escapist fantasies for viewers to actively enjoy is disrupted by the very obstruction that prompted its application in the first place. Gimberg and Nerf's employment of a deliberate and strategic exchange that provides one piece of information while enshrouding another suggests that the lack of information, of reasoning and explanation is not the reactive product of a hostility towards explanation (or even over-explanation) but rather of an appreciation of obscurity that is allowed to remain obscured rather than be glossed over by silliness or solemnity. The indications of an approach that is sympathetic to futility within Gimberg and Nerf's various projects are also indicative, therefore, of an ability to understand the importance of attempting to express the meaninglessness of meaning without feeling the need plaster it over in an attempt to display a sense of awareness that the senselessness of it all is highly problematic, or giggle about it (whether nervously, sarcastically or in earnest). This is not to say that the work is without humour, the absurdity of the project, so enhanced by the insecure paranoia and obsession that its obscurity often provokes in the viewer, ensures that the benefits of self-irony are not lost with the rejection of frivolity and pseudo-sincerity.

It would be possible to frame the invitation to engage in a destructive fantasy as frivolous in the worst kind of way; inciting the malfunction of a perfectly functional boat for no reason at all could indeed seem maliciously selfish.⁵ The question of why this act seems so self-indulgent and callous, so unnecessary, brings up a number of trite questions about the supposed value of art – the real question here is why Gimberg and Nerf's project seems less valid simply because has no obvious utilitarian function (a feature that is exacerbated by the fact that they do not even try to construct some sort of socio-political narrative where the artwork would indeed have a function, if only an instructive or purely intellectual one). The artists themselves do not motion to put the socially conscious viewer at ease, and it is perhaps the task of this projected viewer to grapple with their own questions of meaning, to

⁵ A few days after the invitation to write this article we heard a story from a conservationist who is currently working on the Umgeni River in KwaZulu Natal, about a man who had sparked her interest because she had been told that he, even though he is a vagrant, had a boat. She sought him out to solicit his help thinking that he would be able to use his boat to reach the rubbish that had flowed down the river and gotten stuck amongst the plants and branches. The boat however turned out to be a medium sized piece of polystyrene that the man used to float around on, not necessarily the facility that she and her team were looking for. We couldn't bring ourselves to tell her at the time that the artists we had mentioned to her a few minutes earlier were destroying their boat, and subsequently realized that we had been seduced by the same warped logic with which mothers on the television convince their children to eat their slimy greens (it's wrong to waste food because there are children in Africa that are starving).

interrogate the idea of the hierarchy between the blatantly meaningful (the things we are taught to care about) and the meaningless (the work of the devil).⁶ The endlessly repeated privileging of the meaningful over the meaningless motivates an exceptionally pervasive hierarchy – happy endings, enjoyment, life-changing experiences – stale retributions for lives wiled away in squalid confusion. Exceptionally undramatic, the blatantly unnecessary and unapologetically meaningless finale that Gimberg and Nerf have choreographed for their project at once obstructs the possibility of any sort of resolution, let alone a happy ending.

The senseless violence that marks the conclusion of the *escape* project could be framed as an invitation for fun and games, the persuasive command, 'join us', as written on the flyers for *Fuckup* and the *Real fuckup* taken lightly, as a joke.⁷ But laughter is yet another release that Gimberg and Nerf do not afford their viewer; the heaving bodies that swing bulky axes and the sweating faces that bend over chisels and hammers cannot simply laugh as if they know exactly what they are doing and why. There is a constant feeling of unease that goes beyond the nervous agitation and self-consciousness that is always part of any performance. The artists themselves maintain this sense of foreboding by never actually participating; though they instigate, supervise and document the interactions, they never actually take part in the destructive activities they offer the viewer, thereby preventing the merriment of camaraderie that would allow the now implicated viewer some resolve or excuse for a lack of understanding. Instead the self-conscious viewer is left feeling like the victim of a cunning deception, duped into participation by artists that chuckle as they review the image of your face, contorted and uncertain as you blunder around with their tools. The provocation of this kind of self-absorbed fantasy, this flood of doubts that provoke an unidentifiable anxiety (the unanswerable "why did I do it?") is an illustration of the instigative power of obscurity and the absurd, as well as the excess of meaning and fantasy.⁸

Through their consistent refusal to spell out any sort of reasonable rationale for the project, leaving many things unsaid and others to chance Gimberg and Nerf have essentially

⁶ The evidence of distress in response to the destruction of the boat may also be attributed to the almost fetishistic quality its construction has obtained – as an object the boat is quite beautiful, making its destruction seem even more violent. Gimberg and Nerf have been reprimanded by a visitor during the construction of the boat who asserted that the boat was not theirs to destroy, one participant at the *Real fuckup* also attempted to halt the destruction saying that the boat could still be fixed.

⁷ Similarly, the invitation to *Carpentry 101* in 2007 described the crosses that were to be dismantled as 'traditional wooden sculptures'.

⁸ Even outside of the performative space of the interactive exhibition, Gimberg and Nerf's project has proved unsettling. At the *Ons skrik vir niks* group show a bouncer was hired to prevent Gimberg and Nerf from entering the space, the situational performance, titled *blacklisted* and included in the list of works on show, was a way of getting back at Gimberg and Nerf for excluding their studio-mates from their project.

created a construct that simultaneously proves and disputes itself through direct and indirect self-reference; a puzzling mystery, a complicated scheme, something completely pointless that one can spend hours thinking about. It allows meaning to be made from something that is completely meaningless in any reputedly profound sense, provoking ridiculous discussions, agonizingly futile attempts to prove or disprove, idle banter and feeble debates; ultimately providing us with indubitable proof of our simple minds.



Photo credit: Nick (the lurker)

It is at this point that the critical significance of Gimberg and Nerf's project becomes slightly clearer. Within a context of art production and reception where explanation has become almost obligatory, and where the viewer often expects to be satisfied by a cheekily sharp title, it is possible to imagine that the lack of explanation, reasoning or rationale within Gimberg and Nerf's work makes the project extremely vulnerable to the accusation of selfishness, elitism and egoism, emerging from the wounded ego (which is perfectly normal and nothing to be ashamed of) of a viewer who is silently suffering from a vague feeling of being left out.⁹ A hail of offended questions, 'why obstruct the meaning of your work?', 'why

⁹ Consider the climate of over explanation within our modest slice of the contemporary art world, where the ever prevalent artist's statement is almost always there to provide an access point into the potential meaning of the work on display. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this, not only does this enable the intimidated viewer some solace within the gallery space, it also holds the potential to encourage further thinking (though this is not always realized). The problem is that often, instead of

not explain so that we may share in the pleasures?', 'why not be more generous?'; the viewer recoils as the obstructions are removed to reveal absolutely nothing.

The value and charm of the obscure is that it refuses to be resolved, the truthful answer, its true meaning, simply doesn't exist. This does not mean however that it is meaningless; pointless and futile maybe, but not meaningless – when pointlessness is left bare it translates, through interpretation, into obscurity, prompting a radical void of uncertainty that forces further questioning. The obscure is not inaccessible; it is not afraid of or hostile towards understanding and meaning. Pointlessness is not a full stop. There is no limit to meaning, the signifier can never be censored or inhibited. The dead end clues that are scattered throughout Gimberg and Nerf's various exploits may not lead to anything authentic or singular but they are still clues.

A temporarily inverted landmark, a business card advertising the Church of Satan handed out as an exhibition invitation, beleaguered colleagues employing a local bouncer in an attempt to effect some sort of retribution for their unfair exclusion, a fellow artist framed as a Satanist, silver bullets; signifiers working furiously to release an endless barrage of meaning. In the case of *Escape to Robben Island*, through the construction of a circular system, the provision of seemingly enigmatic structures (birthdates coinciding with important dates, number sequences that repeat themselves, testimonies that no-one can trust) the actual trip becomes real regardless of whether it actually occurred. The sea-spray, the ebb and flow of the tide, the slap of the paddles as they hit the ocean, the triumph of reaching the shore, the sandy toes – the power of the fantasy is such that its actuality is unimportant. As the psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek so succinctly explains "what is missed by the cynic who believes only his eyes is the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, the way this fiction structures our reality".¹⁰

It is possible to construct a theme or thread through Gimberg and Nerf's combination of disparate links and arbitrary fancies, where a predilection for the absurd and the inversion

encouraging further thought, the statement or explanation simply terminates the discussion. It provides the question of 'what does it mean?' with an authorized answer and a satisfying full stop. Consider then, the growing trend of creating perfectly self-contained works, witty, novel, well-executed and topped off with a winning title. Works like this are there for you, there is no inhibition, you can describe them to your friends and family and knock them off their feet with the title of the work, everybody smiles, and everybody grunts that same gratified grunt of someone who's just heard a good joke. Again, there is nothing wrong with this (it is necessary to reiterate in order to prevent this speculative contextualization from being seen as some sort of ridiculous directive on what art should be or aspire to). The problem is that within a context of an industry and a practice that is often plagued by the fear of being called elitist or exclusive, explanation as compensation has become obligatory and as such expected.

¹⁰ (See Žižek 2006, *How to read Lacan*. Granta: London. pg 35).

of the sacrosanct becomes quickly evident. Yet it is ultimately the ability to instigate, to incite the fantasmatic through a dramatized obscurantism that enables their work to expose and confound the many ridiculous obligations and self-inflicted pressures that not only the processes of artistic practice but also the dreary routines of day to day life, so swollen with unacknowledged values, ideals and principles, are imagined to impose.

- B – Logically none. Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.
- D – And preferring what?
- B – The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.
- D – But that is a violently extreme and personal point of view, of no help to us in the matter of Tal Coat
- B –
- D – Perhaps that is enough for today.¹¹

Article written in collaboration with Ryan van Huyssteen
FOR MORE IMAGES AND INFO ON THE PROJECT GO TO
www.onemoredaytoregret.blogspot.com

¹¹ Dialogue between Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit.
(Beckett, S & Duthuit, G. 1965. *Proust and Three dialogues*. London: John Calder.)