

# PROPOSAL

## DOIN' MY PART TO LIGHTEN THE LOAD

nathaniel stern

For my *Jozi and the (M)other City commission*, I **propose that arts critic Sean O'Toole**, editor of Art South Africa, **give up any use of electricity for 24 hours** – direct or indirect. In the dark hours of the evening, I offer O'Toole a **group of South African workers** – car or security guards, house painters, and/or tile-layers that are solicited on the street – to assist him as needed in his personal space; each will be **armed with a hand-crank generator and small light bulb**. The final art installation will consist of the vestiges of the performance: edited texts/letters between myself and O'Toole, documentation photos and the plastic generators and bulbs.

*Doin' my part to lighten the load* begins with my sending this precise text to Carine Zaayman, the exhibition curator. With her approval, it goes on to O'Toole, and the art work continues as an expressed relationship between its performers. I'm **interested in highlighting, unpacking, playing with and antagonizing the layers of hierarchy between real people with varying degrees of symbolic capital, financial influence and sociopolitical authority, within a specifically South African context**. What does it mean for an artist to ask so much of a critic? What kinds of relationships will emerge between us, between O'Toole and his hired hands, between each of them as they get tired or their generators break, between the group as a whole and the photographer present? What kind of dialogue – spoken or unspoken – does this work instigate in post-Apartheid South Africa; against the backdrop of contemporary art; in relation to the failing electrical grid and the politics of electricity at large; as a scenario put forward by an American-born South African artist currently living in Europe? If O'Toole declines participation at the outset or we must reach some form of compromise to move forward, the work remains a discussion about privilege, security and interpersonal relationships, but may be performed in a completely different way. Here, in our ongoing correspondence, what is brought to the fore about South Africans' real and perceived a priori relational structures?

While perhaps not as antagonistic as offering heroin to a group of women in exchange for permission to tattoo their backs with a black line (*160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People, El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo. Salamanca, Spain, Santiago Sierra, December 2000*) or asking five hundred volunteers with shovels to literally move a mountain (*When Faith Moves Mountains, Francis Alys, 2002*), *Doin' my part to lighten the load* initiates several levels of somewhat playful, subversively political and potentially discordant relationships. It intervenes in the complex and dynamic connections between contemporary South Africans by pointing to, and disrupting, extant power structures. I **don't know or suggest any particular outcome other than some interesting dialogue, and a work of art in a gallery**.



*Hand-Crank Low Voltage Generator, 10 purchased/found objects (9 remaining)*

# EDITED CORRESPONDENCE

## SEAN O'TOOLE TO NATHANIEL STERN 5/15/2008

...I work from home, which I do not generally offer as a public space. I would **need to have some assurance about the bona fides** of the people you propose entering my home. South Africa being what it is, **security is always a concern**. Still on your selection, **if they can sing this would be a plus**. I routinely listen to music while working so it would be nice to have some continuity....

## NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE 5/23/2008

...I think this **discussion around our vetting process**, and documentation of the actual day and evening in your flat, will make for a far stronger piece. Admittedly, I had no idea what to expect in your response; your willingness and good humour were the most I could hope for.... I'm ... open for discussion as to the **nature of "worker"** and/or the relationships that lead to such recommendations....

## SEAN O'TOOLE TO NATHANIEL STERN 6/10/2008

...what's the deal once they - everyone - enter my space? Do I have to cater food? How many bodies exactly will be crammed in my space? What exactly am I supposed to do when these people are in my flat? Can I watch TV? Or does the electricity get switched off? I am not comfortable with someone in my room while I sleep, not do I fancy a slumber party in my lounge where I have to sit up all night entertaining. Bearing in mind that it is winter, is a gas heater permissible?...

## NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE 6/11/2008

...These are good questions, and mostly up to you. I had imagined 6 workers, plus a photographer, and now Brendan [the project manager]. Given your request, two of these will be musicians, and the remaining four will likely be using hand crank generators to provide the necessary light for the rest of you.... If you decide it's all too much for you, you can just go to sleep.... **Maybe you'll all listen to live music in the dark, or have a political argument about the New South Africa. Perhaps - and in all likelihood - it will be a relatively banal evening, and I find some beauty in that thought as well.**

...We are talking 24 hours without electricity, so I'd recommend you start in the morning. Since the workers are only there to assist you, and there will be natural light during the day, they'll only be needed later that evening.... When you decide to go to sleep, you can kick them out.... I believe that if you decide to hit the sack at 8 PM and ask everyone to leave, that's an important part of the work.... The deal was electricity, so the gas heater is permissible. This will also unwittingly provide some light, but I imagine that fact might make for some interesting spatial negotiations and photographs...

## NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 6/12/2008

...Glad to have you both thinking this through.... 'my part' ... is not meant to be easy, of course, but this is more **about the relationships that emerge between all parties** - including our workers, and what we need ask of them - than it is about being a hard ass. That being said, if it's not **antagonistic** at all, then little of interest CAN emerge...

...I prefer [Sean] prepare food the day before... I prefer note pad [to laptop], if he is indeed working.... [re: cell phone and email] I prefer none of this - no communication other than in person.... I prefer he not shower for 24 hours.... I prefer [no car]. If he needs to get somewhere he can't walk or bike ride to, let's try to limit both how many round trips he is allowed to take for the day, and the kind of transport - can he bus it? Take a non-metered taxi? Use one of our workers as a driver.... What's **slightly less than reasonable** here, which is what I guess I'm shooting for in most cases?

...I think the **"worker"** label is up for debate, but in the last mails Sean and I agreed that these should probably come **based on recommendation**.... The workers could be gardeners, tilers, beekeepers, car guards, maids, waiters - people who would do it for a small fee and that we can trust (whatever that means)....

## SEAN O'TOOLE TO NATHANIEL STERN & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 6/25/2008

...This may sound **belligerent** but I am not interested in engaging with some **fly on the wall photographer** (with or without a university degree) shadowing me in- or outside my flat. As it is, this seems like an unnecessarily **pretentious add-on to the project**. I have two digital cameras and would prefer, actually **insist**, that the **photographs be made by the various 'workers'** participating in the project. This strategy, I believe, is better suited to the intimacy of the encounter your project is forcing. This is a **non-negotiable stipulation**.

...I work from home. As I understand it, the project is about abstaining from electrified and/or automated work so we will have to survive on water, cold-drinks, dry- and pre-packaged foods and the like. Presumably, if I leave my apartment during the day, we **will have to walk up and down all 16 floors?**

...As originally proposed by Nathaniel, I am to "give up any use of electricity for 24 hours - direct or indirect". If I may, I think the issue here is whether we are artificially trying to **simulate a blackout**, or attempt something more substantial: a **sort of Art Strike** (ala Stewart Home, if far less extreme), or **improvised Do Noth-**

**ing Day** (I think of Adbusters' Buy Nothing Day campaign as a parallel example). In your original proposal, Nathaniel, you mentioned that the project is contextually informed by to "the failing electrical grid and the politics of electricity at large". My question: **does the project require absolute abstention, or are you merely trying to simulate - and by extension, document - someone's improvisation around an obstacle (scarce electricity). I suspect it is not the latter.**

...Is it **necessary**, given the intimacy of the setting, **to have six assistants?** My sense is that you are tendering this number so that it **becomes an obstacle, nothing more....** Two, at most three, seems a more agreeable/sensible number. It may also help the project get past the initial awkwardness of people sitting around, staring at one another, waiting for something to happen.

...I can pee and poop in the dark just fine. Candles for the evening would be a bonus.

## **NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 6/26/2008**

... thanks so much for the mail. This kind of dialogue / critique / negotiating is precisely the "work" of "the work." It's meaty...

[re: photographers] **Belligerence is welcome here, especially yours** [Sean].

It's **fair to place me within the long line of pretentious add-on-ers who think good documentation is both necessary and integral to performance- or event-based interventions** (or installation, for that matter). That being said, I completely **agree with your non-negotiable stipulation / insistence** with regards to the intimate setting and premise of the project, and welcome your offer of digital cameras for the workers....

I'm glad you bring ... up [questions and issues regarding the work itself], as it's important both practically and conceptually. I really like your reference points for the project, and appreciate the clarifying questions.

"Doin' my part" is **absolutely informed by a specifically South African context:** the electrical grid, your role as critic-at-large, the cheap labour we can solicit on the street, etc. The **core of the work, however, is the "somewhat playful, subversively political and potentially discordant relationships" that are instigated, developed, unpacked, etc. with regards to hierarchical power structures within that context.**

The "work" is what comes out of (not an exhaustive list): my **insecurities** around how much I can ask of you, your safety, your **criticism** as person / arts writer / South African, your sometimes **humour** sometimes **worry** sometimes role as **thinker** extraordinaire, Brendan's **pragmatism** and **ideas**, and what will likely be seen as **futility** and **ridiculousness** by the workers we hire. It is not without wonderfully amusing irony, for example, that **loadshedding has actually been suspended** just prior to this event, **rendering "simulation or strike" somewhat moot.**

These issues are where statements like "slightly less than reasonable" come from on my part. There's a tension between what I desire as artist (both in the work and in your approval) and what I am trying to ask for from you. There are similarly idiosyncratic tensions that will come from the coupling of you and Brendan, you and the workers, Brendan and the workers, etc. This is good....

Now that I see your full commitment, yes, let's give ... all [electricity] up. But, for clarity's sake, the **provocations here are interpersonal and societal in terms of "symbolic capital, financial influence and sociopolitical authority"** and informed by the broader South African context, rather than being "about" the electricity per se. "Doin' my part" is, rather, **"about" these negotiations**, which I would **not call "obstacles"** in the everyday sense of the word; they are, **moreover, a microcosm and saturation of the realities of South African labour- and art world-relations** (among other things)....

Now that the above is established, great, [let's give up all electricity in every way]... My new found assertiveness feels good. **(Streeeeetch, yaaaaawn.)**

[re: **Sean: I can pee and poop in the dark just fine.** *Candles for the evening would be a bonus.*]

**A man of many talents.** Let's leave candles out of it, too, then...

...[re: six assistants] I'll first say that I don't mind awkwardness here. I don't mind sitting about. It's not uncommon in South Africa to have our hired hands do just that, to engage in various oddities and awkward situations betwixt and as our interactions. I again would point to the idea of a microcosm of real, rather than simply imputed for the case of this art work, obstacles within the South African context.... Here, I'll allow pragmatism to rule in our negotiations. Let's give specific tasks to our individual workers as we find them, and then stop hiring them when we feel all is covered....

## **BRENDAN COPESTAKE TO NATHANIEL STERN & SEAN O'TOOLE 7/04/2008**

...I have found two artists that will be willing to participate.

They also rap...so they can sing for us....

## **NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 7/04/2008**

...Brendan, would these two artists fit the description "South African workers - car or security guards, house painters, and/or tile-layers that are solicited on the street"? In other words, is that how they make their money: as labourers? If not, I'd prefer we go with two that do.

I initially said these workers could be solicited through recommendation (I still hold to this), and actually **found it interesting in your email yesterday that - like life generally in South Africa, despite all its idiosyncrasies and lacks - this was going to be like any other day**, even ending with a party.

But to hire two artists that don't fit the above definition strays a little too far from said idiosyncrasies, from the

South African context that is the backdrop of the piece. It would be missing one of the key elements in the "microcosm and saturation" I wrote about last week: the **cheap labour and awkward situation**. Artists who actually want to be a part of this (even if they are paid) don't fit the bill.

The reason I said "Perfect" in my last mail was because I was fascinated that what is unfolding after all our negotiations, sans electricity, with said "labourers" and in a relatively antagonistic relationship on many levels, is a party not unlike one Rirkrit Tiravanija might set up. Like everywhere else, we South Africans do our thing. Maybe we even do it better. **Despite all its shit, we have a good time in Joburg**; we make friends and have interesting discussions and find meaning communally, **just like all those Relational Aesthetes over yonder** in the 303 Gallery in New York did back in 1992. I don't think any of us imagined that is where we'd wind up based on the proposal I put forward.

If "Doin' my part" is just a bunch of artists having a party planned ahead of time, however, then it mimics this kind of piece too closely; the party is not despite the situation (whether micro or macro), it's because of it. Perhaps this might be true in either case of workers or artists. But I prefer this not be one of the things I compromise on, and that these two hired hands fit the above description. It would be much truer to the piece's concept as a distinctly South African provocation....

### **BRENDAN COPESTAKE TO NATHANIEL STERN & SEAN O'TOOLE 7/07/2008**

...In my excitement I may have been a bit hasty in my explanation. What I meant... is that I have found two participants for Friday night. One of them happens to work at the Trinity Session doing odd chores for them, painting the walls, hanging art..etc. I don't know the other..but he is a friend of the Trinity Session minimum wage employee. I gave him the title artist as he comes from a kind of art background and will therefore understand what you are trying to achieve. They also rap...thereby I called them artists for rap is a kind of art.... My **concern** with hiring "labourers of the street" is that they are exactly **labourers off the street**. I am aware of what you are trying to do for your project, but I find it a bit awkward to have some guys with little understanding of what is trying to be achieved, cranking generators to **provide light to some privileged people**. If I were one of those labourers, **that would upset me**.... So I opted for the choice of using people who would better understand the relationship you are trying to create or not create.... If you like I will happily source other people.

### **NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 7/7/2008**

...Thanks for that clarification. I understand what you mean, Brendan. And although part of the project is precisely the antagonism you speak of - the workers being upset and not understanding what we are doing - I think what you ask for is not a compromise at all: these artists do indeed fit my initial description as "workers," especially when you take into account my allowance for recommendations. What's wrong with minimum wage labourers who also appreciate projects like these and their goals? These kinds of hires are self-perpetuating workarounds that are often applied in South Africa anyhow, no?...

In fact, as I think this through, perhaps a **tangential benefit to this last discussion** - and our working with these artists - is a gesture towards **opening up the category of "artist" in South Africa more generally**. The label itself, **like "workers," negotiates around a constant set of antagonistic relationships across a vast cross-section of socioeconomic lines**.... I'd like to include their names as artists on the project; thanks for bringing them into the fold, Brendan. In the end, it may be the biggest contribution "Dion' my part" as a whole has to offer.

I'm looking forward to hearing about the day, seeing pics and getting any responses either of you, or they, have. I imagine, as per my last mail, it will be fairly banal. But no less performative and interesting, just as these exchanges have been.

### **SEAN O'TOOLE TO NATHANIEL STERN & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 7/10/2008**

...Since I don't have to work tomorrow, why the heck should I have to wake up early? This epiphany came to me this afternoon....come by at around 10.30.... you are welcome to come at 8 and verify that I'm sleeping.... To condense: sleep seems the most productive - if not provocative - way of declaring that I'm not working....

### **BRENDAN COPESTAKE TO NATHANIEL STERN & SEAN O'TOOLE 7/18/2008**

...after 7 we were all really hungry and so **we had pizza and beer** first. Which was great as it allowed us to relax and get to know each other before we started the "entertainment" part of the day. **Sean was very accommodating** and interested in getting to know both of the helpers. **Steven** is studying **graphic design** and does beat box rapping on Friday nights in Pretoria. He gave us a private **beat box session**. He is really good. **Lungi** works at DKW as an **assistant printmaker** to Jill Ross. It was very interesting... how honest he was with us all in telling his story of how he got there. He has been with DKW for the last 3 years slowly developing as a printmaker. He started off his relationship at DKW by **washing cars during the day and living on the street** at night. He once came into DKW asking for help as he had **crushed his finger stealing manhole covers**.... He was very lucky. **Now he is printing for artists like David Koalane**.

After we got to know each other better and the ice was broken we got into **photography mode** and took **snap shots of Sean trying to read by generator light**. It was somewhat **unsuccessful** as the light produced is so inconsistent and dim. So we **instead** tried our hands at some **inventive photography**, which was quite fun....

Then **Steven** started doing his **beat box**... [he] was pretty good and **Lungi quickly joined in** with some of his own beats which they **played off from the noise of the generators**. Those gen sets truly did make a noise.

The evening was over, Sean sent us home. He went to bed with his migraine. I took Lungi and Steven to the taxi rank. They were **both going onto Soweto to continue their night** of entertainment. I went home to bed. I had a long day and needed to work the following Saturday morning....

### **SEAN O'TOOLE TO NATHANIEL STERN & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 7/22/2008**

...It ended up being a **race against the arc of the sun**.

I woke up latish, well later than usual, around 9.30am, **skipping** the homemade **coffee** - electricity! - in favour of a **pink grapefruit**. Brendon came over sometime soon afterwards. After fiddling with his gas cooker, seeing if it worked (it did), we headed for Wits, on foot - which meant going down 16 flights of stairs. Some weeks before I made an appointment with Julia Charlton, curator of the Wits Art Galleries: I wanted to see and document work belonging to the late artist and iconoclast Neil Goedhals, this for a future issue of Art South Africa. Job done, Brendon and I headed off through Braamfontein to Narina Trogon, a newish restaurant on De Korte Street. I hadn't anticipated that I'd be **eating a cooked lunch**, which turned out to be deliciously rich peanut chicken, Zimbabwean style. Yum. **So far, so easy**, I thought. After a leisurely lunch, which is a rarity for me on a Friday, I headed home, which meant **puffing up 16 flights of stairs**. I think it was somewhere **around this point, walking through my front door on a Friday afternoon with no electricity, that the restrictions of your project began to pointedly impose on my habits**. I **cleaned-up**. I **rearranged** some books. I **packed away** the shoes scattered around my bed. I **tried to write - disaster**. I **read** a bit, perhaps not entirely without intent. (See my scribbled note written on the spur of the moment.) As the light outside began to thin, I found myself **digging through my archive** of slide photographs. It made me smile. Not so long ago, the scenes they documented - rural Japan, bridges in Middlesbrough, a church in Los Angeles, a 1999 campaign poster featuring Thabo Mbeki's face, Kerry - were familiar, near, things that you didn't need a photograph to remember. In the fading light of my flat, they suddenly appeared distant, curious, nostalgic. **The sun set with me sitting on my couch, trying to read a magazine.**

**The night didn't last long.**

Perhaps the **strangest thing** about the invitation of two strangers into my flat is the **oddity of the exchange**. We **shook hands, engaged in stilted conversation** ("You know The Roots!" stated a voice in the dark), **ate dinner, laughed as we played with those daft toys** you gave us to light the night, **chatted** some more ("I used to be what you call a street kid," another voice in the dark), **laughed sincerely now**, chatted a bit about **nothing in particular**. Then it was over.

Did I miss Friday night television, an expensive dinner at some or other eatery, a movie. Not really. Would I participate in a project like this again? I dunno, perhaps involuntarily, especially if Eskom intercedes. Then again, the way the night came to an early end **wasn't all that different to how things unwound while I was in Cape Town earlier this year, when the grid failed and the lights went out. Bored by the dark, I went to bed. Ditto in Braamfontein.**

And that's it, this mix of anecdote and recollection....

### **NATHANIEL STERN TO SEAN O'TOOLE & BRENDAN COPESTAKE 7/25/2008**

Dear Sean:

I want to first **thank you** for your participation in "Doin' my part to lighten the load". Given what the project asked of you, **your negotiations, actions and writing have shown a generous blend of resilience and interest, criticism and critique, humour and humility**. I couldn't have asked for more, and am very pleased with the project thus far (I still consider it ongoing on some level). As per my last mail, Brendon has been given a small sum to donate to the Wits Galleries in your name - please let us know if you prefer that money to go elsewhere.

What are / will be the **outcomes** of "Doin' my part"? I'm not entirely sure. I like that I may have: **temporarily disrupted power in the (art) world for you and myself, Brendon and Lungi and Steven; offered a small time-space for the two latter folks to tell their stories - and I do hope you or others might consider following up with them on their work; explicitly exposed some assumptions around who and what each of us is and how we navigate with and relate to others; implicitly done the same with regards to more general art world persona categories, as well as South African ones; (indirectly) given you a migraine; and had some fun being daft and serious and engaged and open-ended all at once**. I'm very curious to see how viewers will respond to the project....

If you - or others who will eventually and inevitably read this - ever want to reach the two **artist-"labourers"** from 11 July, whether for personal or professional reasons, they are:

**Lungi (Mlunglisi) Konghisa: printmaking assistant and labourer, 071 411 7788**

**Steven Mabuela: designer, rapper and labourer, 079 272 4861**

[Project management and photos by Brendan Copestake.]