

Shooting From The Hip, or, On Being Strategically Unstrategic

Anthea Buys

One thing I loved about working in the old Security Building on Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, was telling people about the chicken fat in the basement. The basement of the Security Building had once housed the storied nightclub Jamesons, a place where, in the 1980s, young subversives socialised across racial lines. A fabled loophole in the liquor act enforced at the time meant that the bar was able to sell alcohol to black and white customers alike. It was an important place, particularly for young white liberals, where politics was practiced through radical sociability. It also did a roaring trade in fried chicken, the residual evidence of which was several deep-fryers still, in 2009, filled with oil and rimmed with thick brown chicken-scented grease. It was as if they had been abandoned mid-fry and left, like the legacy of Jamesons, to an apocryphal future with no custodian.

Built in 1929, the Security Building was all but condemned by 2009, when Phillip Raiford Johnson and I started (and shortly thereafter ended) the project space Cloak & Dagger on the first floor. Falling apart and stripped of its art deco finishes on every level but ground and the rooftop, the Security Building was the perfect place in which to revive the spirit of the patrons of Jamesons: we, like them, were white and a little bit punk, rolling cigarettes under streetlights and being political merely by hanging out.

Cloak & Dagger was really an extension of this hanging out. It was a “gallery” with zero strategy, plans, programme or infrastructure, and virtually no money. The rent for Phillip’s repurposed studio was R1200 per month. We split it and barely kept track of the other costs associated with putting on “shows”: paint, petrol, neon tubes, screws, screenprinting and beers, because there might not have been a flushing toilet at our openings but there certainly was beer. The opening of our first/only exhibition was grand: the place thronged with art people, people neither of us had invited, friends thrice removed. One proper gallerist who had turned up tried to buy a work by Dan Halter. We told him it wasn’t for sale, only because we hadn’t gotten as far as pricing any of the works. We were shooting from the hip, and there seemed to be an appetite for it.

In the weeks after the opening no one came to the exhibition. Our enthusiasm similarly waned, and before we could bring ourselves to make exhibition number two, the building was sold to a property developer. We arrived one day to find the entrance boarded up.

I have never written about Cloak & Dagger, but now that I do, I recognise it as the beginning of a pattern in my career: a compulsion to make project spaces that had no hope of ever being sustainable. After Cloak & Dagger was EVIL SON (2012), a footnote to blank projects, located in an adjacent building in Woodstock, Cape Town. EVIL SON really started with the name. The Michael Stevenson gallery over the road had just rebranded as Stevenson, and the old “MICHAEL STEVENSON” signage, a collection of individual aluminium letters, was dumped in a skip. While I should have been doing actual work at blank projects, where I actually worked, I raided the skip. After playing with various partial anagrams of MICHAEL STEVENSON, including ELVIS, STEVE and SCAM, EVIL SON presented itself as the most viable name for the dubious initiative. I can’t remember exactly who was there for this genesis moment. Part of shooting from the hip is not looking too hard at who’s around you. But Josh Ginsburg, now Director of the A4 Arts Foundation, and artists Kyle Morland and Jared Ginsburg were memorable co-conspirators. EVIL SON lasted a little longer than Cloak & Dagger, and even made it to the Supermarket Art Fair in Stockholm in 2012, but in time it too faded out of existence.

Next was Archipelago (2015-2017), which occupied a corner of the foyer of Hordaland Kunstsenter in Bergen, Norway, where I worked as director from 2014 to 2017. Thanks to public funding and an institutional context, this project space lasted a whole two years and many more exhibitions than either of its predecessors. And after that was Weekend Server (2017-present), a Bergen-based project space sans space, which I co-founded with Scott Elliott. I said farewell to Weekend Server in 2019, finally conceding that my credit card could no longer sustain my lifestyle

of shuttling between Bergen and Johannesburg. Scott remains in charge of what is now a viable project, funded occasionally by the Bergen municipality.

There is a common thread in all of these projects, save for Archipelago: my own money, or at least my ability to access money. Though by no means plentiful, and often actually belonging to the bank, my money has made it possible for me to experiment with art spaces with very little consequence (besides my eventual financial ruin) or need for accountability. It is this freedom which has made it possible for me to experiment curatorially, to create opportunities for artists, (no matter how fleeting) and to develop an internal critical framework for negotiating institutionality. In other words, without Cloak & Dagger in 2009, I never could have run Hordaland Kunstsenter in 2014.

There are of course other vectors, besides money, which need to be acknowledged. My education was broad and omnivorous. Early in my career I had opportunities to travel. Along the way I was mentored, if inadvertently, by Matthew Krouse, who had been the arts editor at the Mail & Guardian, where I landed a regular writing gig. In a similar vein, I have had many prescient, adventurous and odd collaborators, most of whom also turned out to be great teachers, friends and resources. All of these factors trained me to make exhibitions, texts, projects and spaces that I, and hopefully others, found stimulating and fulfilling.

Things could have panned out differently. I might have hunkered down in my museum job at the Iziko South African National Gallery – an engagement which lasted 11 frenzied months in 2011-2012 – until retirement. This has been the strategy of some of the beleaguered institution's staff. Predictably, I left impulsively, but my turbulence saved me (and the museum) from what would certainly have been a life of friction.

On reflection, I owe my career as a curator to an entirely unstrategic "strategy" of restlessness: a hunger for the next project, the next adventure, the next institution. It has always been about the next thing, and not this one. It's something I will address with my next therapist, but this compulsion to move forwards has been a tremendous source of energy and creativity.

This is how I lived my twenties and the first half of my thirties. And – to return to money – it would have been impossible had it not been for a small but powerful financial buffer between me and life. I come from a line of lightly aspirational working class grunts, so this buffer has never been substantial or luxurious. But I always knew that if I spent all my rent money on art stuff I would be able to return to the parental roost. This is white privilege, and it enabled me to bumble and burn my way through doing what I love.

The art world needs to find – or indeed to make – more buffers, ones that don't merely correlate with historical privilege. Calls for transformation are really calls for the redistribution of security and access, because without security and access, the stakes of creative labour are simply too high. In other words, if you're going to shoot from the hip you need to be able to miss.