

DIARY OF A BAD HALF YEAR

Reflexivity is an essential part of being a critic. It's not a complicated condition, all it requires is that a writer occasionally pause, scratch her/his head, and wonder, "Hey, what am I doing?" More often than not, this innocuous and singular question is marked by a sneeze, a noisy "Achoo!" that heralds the onset of a flu-like virus of uncertainty. What quickly turns into why: "Why am I doing this?" It's a slippery slope from there. "For who am I doing it?" "At what cost?" I doubt whether this sort of reflexive narcissism is typical only of critics; any writer who cares about the construction and reception of their word-ideas will have experienced a similar crisis of faith, not once but many times.

The word crisis has, however, become something of a catchphrase in recent debates about the health of the arts pages, locally as much as elsewhere. Reflexivity, a healthy and necessary condition for any writer, has lapsed into pathologising. We're sick, our profession is sick, we're all going to die. The diagnosis is fatal when it comes to contemporary arts journalism. Basically, it's kaput. Sometimes I agree, but mostly not. In explaining why, I could do one of two things. I could rehearse three centuries' worth of debate around the "substantive social function" of criticism, as Terry Eagleton and countless other critics have done, or I could tell you what I've been doing the past six months. I'm more familiar with the latter.



JANUARY

I'm in training for Kilimanjaro. Artist Jacques Coetzer, who is also a consultant to the

Pretoria-based coffee roaster TriBeCa, has engineered me an invite on a tour of the Tanzanian coffee growing region. Good news, except I have a bunch of deadlines: 1. interview artist Nicholas Hlobo for an Italian publisher (fee €1 200); 2. write a short fiction for artist Malcolm Payne's exhibition catalogue ("write anything," he says; fee R3 000); 3. interview comic book artist Jo Daly for *The Sunday Times* (fee R3 000); 4. write a fake account of me chasing JM Coetzee, a noted cycling enthusiast, during *The Argus* Cycle Tour, for the blog Mahala's print edition (no fee); also 5. write entries for the *Wallpaper** City Guide to Cape Town (fee £750).

In Tanzania, I show Coetzer my white shirt and black tie, which I plan to wear when I summit. The idea was partly prompted by something he told me a few weeks earlier: "I don't fly to a place without doing something. I must use the petrol. So I always keep making art, always." Jealously impressed, Jacques runs off into Moshi town, returning with an aluminium ladder: he plans to climb 1.5-metres higher than anyone else. Executives from the trip's sponsor, Woolworths, grimace, doubly so when I write about Jacques's madcap escapade for *The Sunday Times* (fee R5 446). They wanted a sober story about the impact of global warming on the local coffee industry, but instead.

An internal memo describes the journalist (me) as having suffered severe altitude sickness (true).

Five days after summit night I'm in Holland to view four exhibitions and write about one of them. Dutch contemporary art museums have a €1 600 fund that enables them to fly an English-language art critic to Holland to write a print (not online) review. I write a bi-monthly art column for the London-based magazine, *frieze*; more prosaically, I also write reviews. On day two I visit a mini-retrospective devoted to Russian artist Olga Chernysheva at BAK, in Utrecht. "The post-perestroika proletarian figure is the defining leitmotif of this exhibition," I write in a 1 300-word synopsis of my trip for my editor. At the Van Abbemuseum, in Eindhoven, I meet the museum's director, Charles Esche, co-founder of the art journal *Afterall*. I rant about Facebook, misquoting Stephen Burt's June 2010 article in the *London Review of Books* ("internet-driven disintermediation," writes Burt, "covers the rise of downloaded music, the lawsuits about it, the migration of 'little magazines' to online-only versions, the universal availability of porn, the universal availability of twee hedgehogs, and the disappearance of books review sections from newspapers"). Esche sends me a friend request the next morning.

FEBRUARY

The short fiction I wrote for Malcolm Payne has been demoted to the back of his catalogue and carries the oversized header, "Afterword" (my original title was "File under Payne, Malcolm"). The downgrading reminds me of something artist Robert Hodgins told me: I am not reverent enough of artists. I prefer the novelist Richard Ford's version of things. "I am a sceptical man," he told a Franschoek book crowd in 2008, "not a cynical one." Ditto. The *Wallpaper** job continues to drag, the work to fee ratio long since exceeded. While in Joburg I interview artist Tracey Rose for a *Sunday Times* profile (fee R3 000). She's sober, giggly, engaging. So is her show, which I review formally for *frieze* (fee £125).

On my Joburg trip, I also meet artist Joachim Schönfeldt. He wants me to collaborate on a new book. Like Malcolm, he uses the dreaded word "anything" in his brief. There is no fee, he adds. Okay, I say, I'll write a short story. Fine he replies. I feel confident. In 2003 Joachim asked his long-time friend, author and essayist Ivan Vladislavic, to contribute something/anything to his Model Men project. Ivan's contribution was the first draft for his 2006 novel, *The Exploded View*, which is dedicated to Joachim. Later in the day I meet Ivan. We chat about *Double Negative*, his new novel, written to accompany a book of photographs by David Goldblatt. He talks about the declining state of book reviews. A two-century-old critical enterprise is on its way out, he mourns.

MARCH

I present a paper on Ivan's new book at a conference on the same day as Hokusai's great wave materialises as fact and crashes into northeastern Japan. "Does knowing what criticism is, ontologically speaking, necessarily help explain what we expect or want it to do?" I ask my small audience. "I am inclined to say no. Perhaps then we need to start thinking the other way round and let our desires fashion the form of the critical response." Arguably, that is what blogs are doing.

"Where once reasoned debate and knowledgeable evaluation flourished, there are now social networking and marketing algorithms and a nattering gaggle of bloggers," wrote AO Scott, *The New York Times'* movie critic, in a reasoned assessment of sea change in arts journalism occasioned by the advent of online ("A Critic's Place, Thumb and All" *New York Times* 31 March 2010). Scott sounds glum; he isn't. He is a sanguine critic, which we need more of. "The future of criticism is the same as it ever was," he offers. "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."

But you know all this. Let me conclude my March report with a financial status report. Professional fee for speaking on Ivan's work at a University of Johannesburg

conference: zero. Publication fee for usage of conference paper in June issue of *Art South Africa*: zero. Days spent researching, writing and editing final paper: one week, more or less. All of which explains why, for 10 days in March, I travel to the Zimbabwe border to research a 3 000-word reportage feature on illegal migration and cigarette smuggling for the *Mail&Guardian*. Hey, it's what you have to do to pay the bills. More than that, these encounters with the real are vital for sharpening one's critical insights. Go stand in the pre-dawn queues outside Musina's refugee reception centre, then watch *District Nine* again.

APRIL

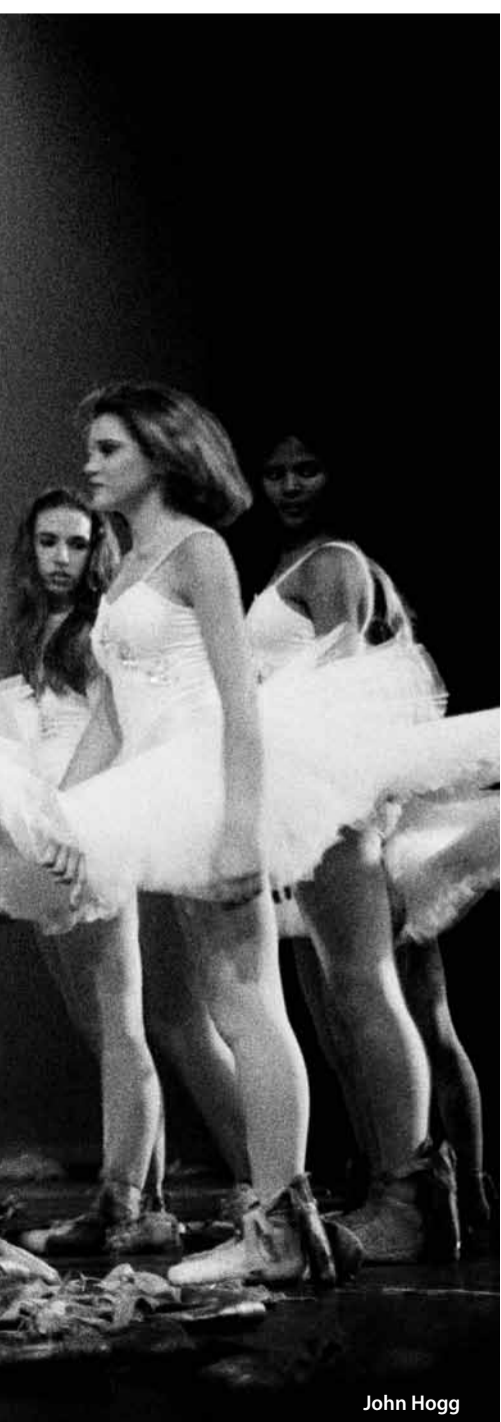
The real. "At some point South African artists need to take a deep breath, peg their noses, and dive out into the deep-end of experience, the unknown and uncharted depths of reality in making," wrote Ivor Powell in 1997. "I see few artists that one might think of as being at the cutting edge who are actually exploring and defining the contents and the nature of experience in South Africa." I am researching Powell, a former art critic who transformed into an accomplished investigative journalist. I email Ivor some questions. He is evasive, as is his manner, yet also forthcoming. "The way that art works right now," he offers during one email exchange, "I really don't understand it and I don't understand it with an intensity that amounts to blinding insight. Value is entirely opaque and determined by forces that are alien to what I care about in art." Art has been hijacked by the marketing of art, he adds, describing this practice as a species of commodity trading. "And it pisses me off." Speeding fines on my drive up to Grahamstown from Cape Town to present my findings: one. Speaker's fee at conference: none.

MAY

A bad month: I have to write about painter Vladimir Tretchikoff, twice. His exhibition at Cape Town's National Gallery is an aberration, an exercise in hubris, overzealous ambition and ideological gerrymandering. I say as much in my online review (fee R2 300). The most interesting debates, however, occur in private. "If one criticises this kind of show you dignify it with the attention and feed the monster that it is," remarks a colleague. "Yet passing over it with silence seems an act of bad faith." I also fall off my bicycle. Four stitches under my right eye. Everyone thinks I was punched.

JUNE

An even worse month: Piglet and I break up, after six years. Piglet used to be a film critic. Advertising is more profitable. I fly to Pretoria to see Gerard de Leeuw's toppled Verwoerd sculpture at the Voortrekker Monument for an 1 800-word *Mail&Guardian* feature (fee R5 625, I pay for the flight). The architect of apartheid lies on his back, his green body covered with mud-coloured dauber nests. *Art in America* ask me to pitch more reviews after reading my Zwelethu Mthethwa review (fee \$150). I should be celebrating; instead I cry, a lot. And write about Santu Mofokeng's photo of his brother, Ishmael, who died from Aids-related complications in 2003. In London I tell an audience at the Victoria & Albert Museum how Santu cried when he told me about Ishmael in an interview. I stumble nervously during my reading, which is unremunerated; I also paid my way to London. On my last day in David Cameron's financially-bruised capital, I stumble, differently bruised, into a bookshop near Great Russell Street. I buy Terry Eagleton's book *The Function of Criticism*. I smile at his description of the 17th century critic as a "flaneur or bricoleur, rambling and idling among diverse social landscapes where he is everywhere at home". I'm doing okay, I realise.



John Hogg