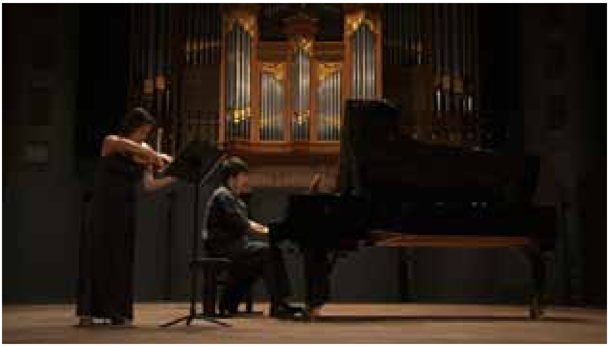
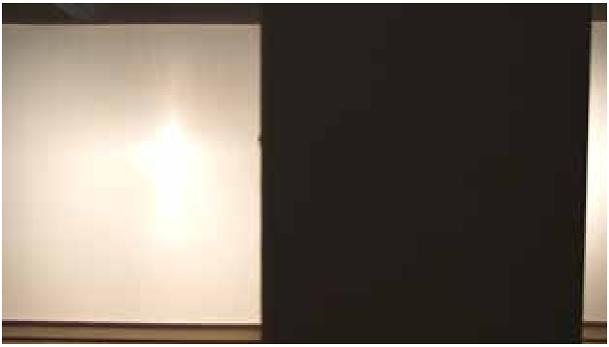
screen 1



screen 2

screen 3

screen 4



This conversation took place between ***Thomas Caron*** *and* **Simon Gush** *via Skype on 24/10/2010. It is a continuation of a conversation started in Santiago de Chile on the occasion of the "Santiago Manifest" (2007).*

Could you start by explaining the background against which "Four for 4" came into existence?

I was working with Prokofiev in previous works, "The Wolf's Theme" (2009) and "1st & 3rd" (2010). It was through researching for these works that I became interested in the person and position of Prokofiev. Although he left Russia after the 1917 revolution (and therefore stayed away from the political change that was happening there), he returned to be part of the re-imaging or articulating of a national identity for the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the kind of personal, more experimental, music he composed was frowned upon by the state. So he found himself constantly trying to participate and being repressed at the same time. I was interested in that moment of struggle, in the desire to try to articulate a kind of national identity and the nature of the way this was restrained. While I was researching around Prokofiev, I came across a piece of music that seems to speak of some of his inner struggle. A lot of my work evolved from his "Violin Sonate No.1" (1946). This piece of music was dedicated to David Oistrakh, the violinist who had scored its violin parts. I started doing some research about Oistrakh and soon became interested in the way he also had to struggle with being used by the Soviet state as a representative, while also being restricted in terms of where, when and what he could play. Although Oistrakh believed in the overall Soviet project, he was quite critical of what was happening within the Soviet Union. I thought both musicians had an interesting relationship in terms of trying to understand what it means to represent something that is much bigger than yourself or a singular identity or desire. I was interested in this idea as a way of trying to speak politically.

While I was working on that, I was also doing a lot of reading around film and I became very interested in Eisenstein's idea of montage. He had outlined a way of constructing a message as well as a method of creating meaning by using two images to make a third meaning. At the same time, he had a very specific idea to use this montage as a didactic tool for instructing people with a certain message or meaning. I was interested in the idea of this very direct, unambiguous approach as different to how we normally conceive of the creative act. My intention was to research the tension between Eisenstein's ideas of montage and an open-ended, speculative approach. This is the central concern of my current project concerning 'speculative montage'.

If you are talking about ways of constructing meaning between the different screens, it's important that the people who will be reading this understand what is being shown on each screen. The first video shows a live performance of Prokofiev's "Violin Sonate No.1", which is quite easy to understand. The other screens, the sky above the Potemkin steps, a re-enactment of a Copperfield illusion and the eternal ice of a glacier in Norway are more difficult to read. Could you explain a bit?

The sky above the Potemkin steps refers to Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin" (1925). In particular, the scene in which the tsar's troops are marching down the stairs towards the people of Odessa and the massacre that follows. What's interesting is that this particular scene in the film never took place in real life. The historical site of the massacre isn't on those steps. The creation of that scene needs to be seen in Eisenstein's way of thinking around the idea that, in order to represent the truth about something, one has to move past a surface truth and find the essence. I didn't necessarily want to represent that moment of the massacre on the stairs, but it is clearly a reference to the kind of montage

used by Eisenstein. And at the same time, it refers to Oistrakh and Prokofiev who were both Ukrainian by birth. David Oistrakh was from Odessa and, while growing up, often listened to the orchestra and opera playing in the Odessa Opera House, located at the top of the same stairs. So the location pulls a certain number of historical references and ideas together and becomes a kind of slowly shifting image.

In a lot of ways, the video screens run in differing time signatures. You have the very straight linear, beginning to end, with the musical piece and you have the image of the sky that can almost happen at any moment at any place. And then you have the very specific sort of time signature where the characters move through the wall, which happens four times within each movement of the music. Then there is the image of the glacier that is totally unchanging, or, at least, the change is imperceptible. I was interested in the pace of the glacier. The one I filmed moves forward at a speed of one metre a day. It was a way of introducing a differing feeling and pacing to the work. I see it as a last tribute to Oistrakh and Prokofiev. So you have a different sense of how these images express themselves. I like the idea of the gradual changes in the sky, which is, in a way, a witness to certain events. It becomes both changing and unchanging.

With the wall, I was thinking about a David Copperfield illusion. Copperfield walked through the Great Wall of China in 1986. This was just before a lot of changes took place that had a massive impact on the last twenty years, prior to the Tiananmen uprising and the fall of the Berlin wall. And, of course, it is quite a symbolic gesture to move through a wall. On the other hand, this video is connected to another piece I was working on at that time.

Are you talking about "Blind Test" (2010), where you've put a violin inside a wall in the home of a collector?

Yes, that piece comes from looking at Stradivarius violins. What I was interested in was the idea of the Stradivarius as the perfect form of expression. It has never been scientifically proven what exactly gives the instrument its unique sound. Nevertheless, it is believed to offer a perfect way of expressing something. I became fascinated by the idea that a huge number of the violins were created, but not a lot of them survived. A couple have been found, however, most remain missing. There is some kind of mystique around the Stradivarius. You might even find one under your grandmother's bed. During the Korean War, an American soldier discovered one hidden inside a wall. I created a work where an exact replica of a Stradivarius was hidden inside a wall. I like the idea of this moment of potential. Within the object-based context of art, it becomes something invisible, an idea of discovering a perfect instrument. I was thinking about ways of talking about that moment of being invisible but having to articulate something, the moment of disappearing into a wall and then re-emerging. This moment before emerging is one of potentially speaking. It's about having the desire to articulate perfectly, a perfect tension between art and propaganda. The idea of finding this way of speaking that shows a political and personal desire.

This investigation of a way of speaking that is driven by both personal as political desire is something that basically runs through your whole oeuvre. Maybe this conversation is becoming too broad and we should go back to a more specific subject. Let's go back to the moment we met each other in Santiago de Chile for the "Santiago Manifest"[1]. We met there with 28 people, from a lot of different

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[1] The "Santiago Manifest" was a cooperation between the S.M.A.K. (Belgium), the Academy of Munster (Germany), the art centre Matucana 100 in Santiago de Chile and the HISK in Ghent (Belgium), which took place in October 2007 in Santiago de Chile, with the communal development of its own manifesta as its ground idea. The basic concept was that a group of people from all over the world, with different visions and backgrounds, would have the opportunity to communicate freely about subjects they found important. The result of these meetings would be binary: on the one hand, an exhibition and, on the other, a written manifesto in which mutual positions were endorsed by all participants.

backgrounds, with the idea of seeing whether we could find a common ground and whether it was necessary to communicate anything about that common ground. In the end, we didn't get further than one common sentence. This makes me wonder if the first step in speaking politically should not be the defining of a possible content, rather than the way in which this content can be communicated.

I think we ended up arguing in circles a lot because everyone was sticking to their position, not realising how they were not coming together to communicate. I think the problem was not that we couldn't reach an agreement, but that we never even got to the point of disagreement. We never found a common ground because we never defined the surface on which the discussion should take place.

This has come up strongly in two works I produced after Santiago, "Underfoot" (2009) and "In the Company Of" (2008), which try and talk about the surfaces on which interaction takes place. They attempt to set up these surfaces as contested and not an objective, given quantity. One of the things we sometimes forget is that, when we deal with a group like the one in Santiago, everyone's backgrounds are so diverse that, when we say the same thing, we don't necessarily mean the same thing. The way in which these conversations happened was very much contested. We never managed to establish what the playing field in which we situate ourselves is. In a way, what I was trying to do with "Four for 4" comes before you start setting the terms of the playing field. It comes before and during the interaction, trying to think around what the effective question to ask might be.

I think we both agree here. This is actually what I meant when I said that you first need to define the content of your speaking, before you start to think about the way in which you can speak. And I think this also connects with our conclusion in Santiago de Chile. Finally, we ended with a one-sentence manifesto that basically stated that the only common ground we could find was the fact that we were all looking for common ground.

I think that what we ended up with was a sentence that allowed a broad enough interpretation. It didn't offend anyone and didn't tackle anything beside the fact that we were inconclusive. This is interesting in itself but also represents some of the failure of the project, if you can call it a failure. You could say it accurately represents a cross section of artists unable to communicate and therefore it carries some weight. But it did fail to get to a point of where there really was an engagement. There were moments when groups were able to discuss topics, as long as they didn't have to do with the project. It might also have been a structural failure in that Philippe Van Cauteren's openness was generous as a proposition, but it also allowed for too much space.

In a way, that is true, but this openness was a conscious choice. He chose to be on the same level as everybody else and not to impose any boundaries or a framework for us to discuss. None of us did that either and nobody took control of the discussions. I think it was a very interesting process and, without a doubt, an important experience for everyone involved. But, as a member of the public, the end result might have been a bit disappointing.

For me, the exhibition was very strange. It was more like a collection of individual projects that didn't hold together as a whole. It became a way to not have to deal with the problem that we weren't communicating.

Even though you chose not to participate in the exhibition, it actually would have served as a perfect framework for your work. Your investigation on taking positions and how to speak *politically relates very well to the problems we had in Santiago de Chile.*

It is interesting and it is something I have thought about a lot. I have been making work and trying to articulate these political thoughts about how you cannot actually speak. Some of the different problems that arose during the Santiago Manifest were based in the fact that some of the participants were only concerned about their individual projects. And that is very much part of the act of speaking politically, or at least trying to approach politics. I see this as trying to balance personal desires and ideals in finding a space where you can articulate something. You might have to sacrifice some of your individual identity, and we are all frightened of that, in a way. When I look around at the world, it has become problematically individual in the sense that collective identities have completely deteriorated.

So what happened in Santiago de Chile is applicable to a broader context?

Yes, although, in a broader context you would have a very general group that has very little common ground. In Santiago de Chile, we were all artists and had a certain amount of communality, more than in an actual society.

And how does that group of artists relate to general society? Or, more specifically, how do you?

I think I am really interested in finding a way to approach and tackle a position. My interest is in facilitating and constructing a way of speaking around politics and how we live as a society. I personally feel that is very important, but I don't necessarily believe that it is the role of every artist. For me, there is a lot of space for different kinds of investigations and my practice has always been linked to a feeling of responsibility to be part of or to stimulate some dialogue. I think I no longer feel that my position needs to be explicit. I haven't changed my position, but I have learned the value of sometimes stepping back a little and allowing for dialogue to happen. I think it's important that you leave space for people to think for themselves, that you don't explicitly tell them everything.

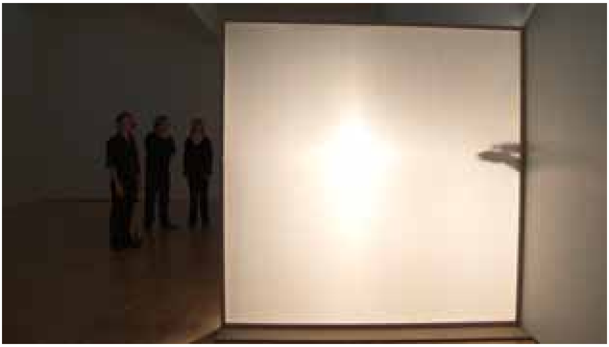
It is true that your older work leaves less room for discussion. When I first saw a piece like "3 Point Turn" (in collaboration with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt, 2007)*, it made me kind of angry. The directness of the action irritated me. Is this change in directness in your more recent work linked to the fact that you left South Africa?*

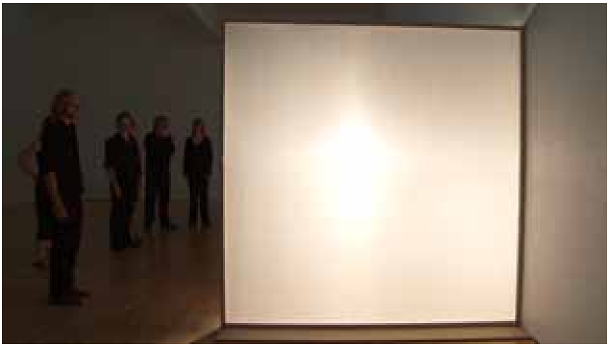
It is a much more direct and literal way of addressing things than in my recent work, a much more straight-down-the-line approach. I didn't intend the piece to be deeply shocking, but it is meant to annoy a little. When I made it, I hadn't spent those 3 years outside of South Africa. I felt like I had come from a society where things are much more present and in your face and you had to respond in very strong or direct ways. Being in different contexts and spending some time outside South Africa allowed me to try approach things more subtly. I also learned the value of not always reacting so directly.

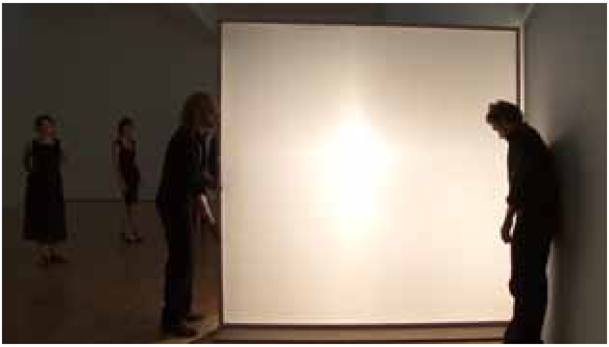
So does being back in South Africa after all that time change that?

I do think it's interesting to be back, trying to rethink how I position myself in relation to what is going on here. I am really excited to be making new work and trying to rearticulate my position. Maybe it will change things in my work being back here. Distance really helped me to understand some things about myself and how I want to work more clearly. At a certain point, I also started to want to see if things that I learnt being away could be applied here. I kept up with what was going on in SA while I was in Belgium and, at a certain point, it makes sense to me to immerse myself here for a period and see where I land up.

Simon Gush is an emerging artist, currently based in Cape Town, South Africa. / Thomas Caron is a curator at the S.M.A.K. in Ghent.





screen 4