LAUREN BEUKES

EXHIBITIONIST

There is already spillage out the doors by the time I get to Propeller, which can only be a good sign when it's just gone six thirty, but I feel fractal with nerves.

"You're late." Jonathan latches onto my arm at the door and swishes me inside through the crowd. I can't believe how many people there are crowded into the gallery. There is a queue up the stairs to see Johannes Michael's atom mobile, but the major throng is in the main room, and not, I regret to say, for my retro print photos.

They're here to see Khanyi Nkosi's sound installation, freshly returned from her Sao Paolo show and all the resulting controversy. She only installed it this afternoon, snuck in undercover with security, so it's the first time I've seen it in the flesh. It's gruesome, red and meaty, like something dead turned inside out and mangled, half-collapsed in on itself with spines and ridges and fleshy strings and some kind of built-in speakers, which makes the name even more disturbing—Woof & Tweet.

I don't understand how it works, but it's to do with reverb and built-in resonator-speakers. It's culling sounds from around us, remixing ambient audio, conversation, footsteps, glasses clinking, rustling clothing, through the systems of its body, disjointed parts of it inflating, like it's breathing, spines quivering.

It's hard to hear it over the hubbub, but sometimes it's like words, almost recognisable. But mostly it's just noise, a fractured music undercut with jarring sounds that seem to come randomly. Sometimes it sounds like pain. It is an animal. Or alive at any rate. Some lab-manufactured plastech bio-breed with just enough brainstem hard-wired to respond to input in different ways, so it's unpredictable—but not enough to hurt, apparently, if you believe the info blurb on the work.

"It's gratuitous. She could have done it any other way. It could have been beautiful."

"Like something you'd put in your lounge, Kendra? It's supposed to be revolting. It's that whole Tokyo tech-grotesque thing. Actually, it's so derivative, I can't stand it. Can we move along?"

I run my hand along one of the ridges and the thing quivers, but I can't determine any noticeable difference in the sounds. "Do you think it gets traumatised?"

"It's just noise, okay? You're as bad as that nutjob who threw blood at Khanyi at the Jozi exhibition. It doesn't have nerve endings. Or no wait, sorry, it does have nerve

endings, but it doesn't have pain receptors."

"I meant, do you think it gets upset? By all the attention? Isn't it supposed to be able to pick up moods, reflect the vibe?"

"I think that's all bullshit, but you could ask the artist. She's over there schmoozing with the money, like you should be."

Woof & Tweet suddenly kicks out a looped fragment of a woman's laugh, that startles me and half the room, before it slides down the scale into a fuzzy electronica.

"See, it likes you."

"Don't be a jerk, Jonathan."

"There's some streamcast journalist who wants to interview you, by the way. And he's pretty cute.'"

My stomach spasms. This is another thing Jonathan does to keep me in my place—as in, we're not together. I should be grateful. After all, he's the one who organised this exhibition, or should that be exhibitionist? Because isn't it my soul laid bare here?

"Great, thanks. I need a drink."

"I'll get it. Just go talk to Sanjay. What do you want?"

"Anything."

Jonathan propels me in the direction of Sanjay, who is standing in a cluster of people, in deep conversation. The one is clearly money, some corporati culture patron or art buyer; the other, I realise, is Khanyi Nkosi. I recognise her from an interview I saw, but she is so warmly energetic, waving her hands in the air to make a point and grinning, that I can't match her to her work.

It makes me feel desperately alone. There are all these people circling, like Johannes Michael's swirl of paper atoms upstairs, but the connections to me are only tenuous.

I can't deal with this right now. I push through the queue, detouring back towards the entrance and the open air when I overhear some over-groomed loft dwellers giggling into their wine over my favourite photograph, Self-Portrait.

"And this. I'm so tired of Statement! Like she's the only angst child ever to embrace the distorted body image."

“Oh Emily. I quite like the undeveloped. Because she is. You know, still young, coming into herself. The artist in flux, emergent.”

“Well, precisely. It’s so young. You can’t even tell if it’s technically good or not, it’s all so… damaged.”

I could point out that the whole point is that it’s damaged, that I wanted to work with film rather than digital precisely because of the inherent risk of flawed materials that I have to order online or pick up at the Milnerton market. The processing is a bitch.

Some of the pictures have come out perfectly, like the queasy close up of a drag queen bumming a light from a garage attendant at 3am, her face all texture, the make-up caked in the lines around her pursed mouth lit by the glow of the flame. The others have not. They’re over- and under-exposed, bleached, washed-out, over-saturated with colour with blotches and speckles and stains like coffee cup rings or arcs of white where the canister has cracked and let the light slip inside. Self-Portrait is one of them. 1.5 x 3m. It came out entirely black. No-one knows how to use film anymore.

I’m about to lean over and explain all this, make my motives transparent, even when I know I don’t have to, but I’m cut short by a flurry of activity at the door. I’ve been aware of a low peripheral clamour, but now it erupts. There are people shoving, wine spilling from glasses and yelps of dismay.

“This is a private function!” Jonathan of all people yells, spouting clichés at the rush of people in black pushing in through the crowd, their faces blurred like they’re anonymous informants in documentary footage. It is so disturbing, that it takes me a second to catch on that they’re wearing smear masks. Another to realise that they’re carrying pangas and a prog-saw.

A few people scream, sending out a reverb chorus from Woof & Tweet. The crowd presses backwards. But then the big guy in front yells, “Death to corporate art!” and the woman who dissed my work (Emily), laughs scornfully and really loudly. “Oh god! Performance art. How gauche.” There are murmurs of relief and snickers, and the living organism that is the crowd reverses direction, now pressing in again to see.

The man in the front grabs Emily by the throat, so she gives a dismayed shriek, and raises up his panga, then bringing it down not aimed not at her, but at Woof & Tweet. The thing emits a lean crackle of white noise. Camera phones click. There is a scattershot of applause, and laughter from the audience, as the others move in, four of them, with one guarding the door, to start laying into the creature. I didn’t think this kind of promotional stunt would be Sanjay’s thing.

The prevailing mood seems to be not outrage or fear, but excitement. People are grinning, nodding, eyes overbright, which makes it seem all the more horrific. It’s only

when the artist starts wailing that it becomes apparent that this was not part of the program. And only then do the smiles drop from mouths, like glasses breaking.

The blades tearing through the thin flesh and ribs of Khanyi Nkosi's thing with a noise like someone attacking a bicycle with an axe. The machine responds with a high-hat backbeat for the melody assembled from the screams and skitters of nervous laughter. It doesn't die quietly, transmuting the ruckus, the frantic calls to the SAPS, and Khanyi wailing, clawing, held back by a throng of people. It's like it's screaming through our voices, the background noise, the context.

The bright sprays of blood make it real, spattering the walls, people's faces, my prints, as the blades thwack down again and again. The police sirens in the distance are echoed and distorted as Woof & Tweet finally collapses in on itself, rattling with wet smacking sounds.

They disappear into the streets as quickly as they came, shaking the machetes at us, threatening don't follow, whooping like kids. With the sirens closing in, the big guy spits on the mangled corpse. Then, before he ducks out the door and into the night, he glances up once, quickly, at the ceiling. No-one else seems to notice, but I follow his gaze up to the security cams, getting every angle.

I'm sick with adrenalin. Emily is screaming in brittle, hyperventilating gasps. Her friend is trying to wipe the blood off her face, using the hem of her dress, unaware that she has lifted it so high that she is flashing her lacy briefs. Khanyi is kneeling next to the gobs of her animal construct, trying to reassemble it, smearing herself with the bloody lumps of flesh.

There is still an undercurrent of thrill, a rush from the violence—no-one was hurt, apart from Khanyi Nkosi's thing. Everyone is on their phones, taking pictures, talking. There are even more people trying to wedge into the space, so that the cops, who have finally arrived, have to shove their way inside.

Self-Portrait is covered in a mist of blood. I move to wipe it clean, although I'm scared the blood will smear, will stain the paper, but just then Jonathan wraps his arms around me and kisses my neck. I fold against him like a collapsible paper lantern.

"Don't ruin the effect, sweetheart," he whispers, his breath hot against my throat. I can't help it. I glance up at the cameras again. The beady red lights, the fisheyes recording everything. Already the cops are asking for the footage. Jonathan kisses my neck again and grins.

"You were brilliant. Now, should we go find that journalist?"