

**A**N EMPTY stand is an eyesore at an art fair – it communicates some level of dysfunctionality; organisational issues. At the FNB Joburg Art Fair (JAF) it had to do with the politics of business and a political artwork that didn't go down too well with the organisers, Artlogic, headed by Ross Douglas.

Three waiters stood at the entrance of the vacant stand while Douglas, his creative director Cobi Labuschagne, Liza Essers, owner of the Goodman Gallery and David Goldblatt discussed Goldblatt reinstalling his exhibition *Frock and Other Pictures* in the vacant stand.

Goldblatt stood firm; he wouldn't do so until Douglas was willing to allow Ayanda Mabulu's *Yakhali-inkomo (Black Man's Cry)*, featuring President Jacob Zuma crushing the head of a miner under his foot, to hang on the outer wall of Commune1's stand.

As the featured artist of this year's JAF and one of the most recognised artists here and abroad, Goldblatt was playing with a strong hand. Yet he was full of regret. He was dismayed that he had to force Douglas's hand, that the self-censorship he knew from the apartheid era had raised its ugly head again and that he felt he was standing virtually alone in this act of protest. It also pained him that it recalled a similar experience.

"It was just me and Bongsi Dhlomo who stood at the gates of the Goodman Gallery when the ANC supporters marched outside," recalls Goldblatt of the day hundreds gathered in Parkwood to protest against the display of *The Spear (of the nation)*, Brett Murray's contentious image of Zuma.

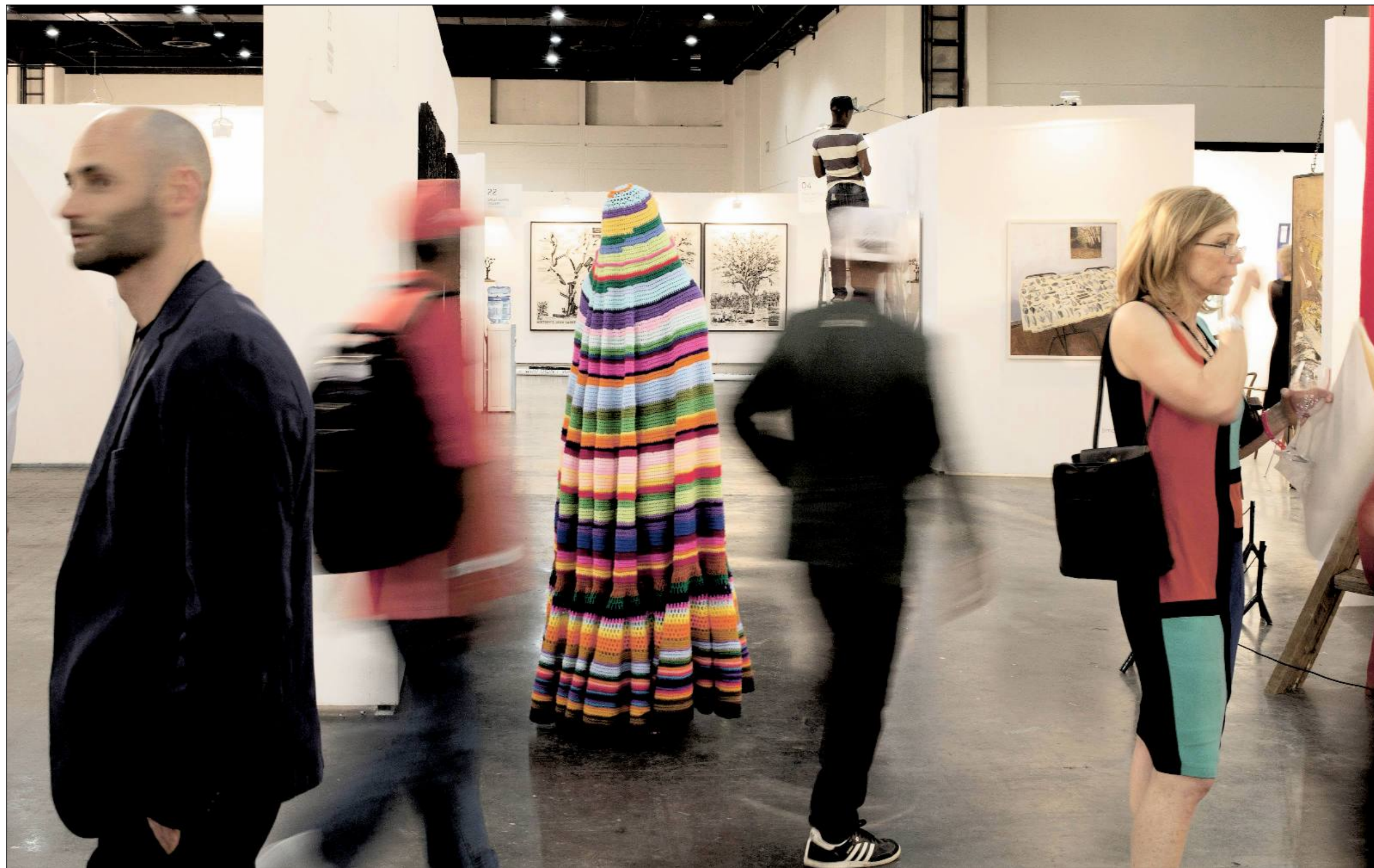
Confirming the negative impact of *The Spear* debacle on the consciousness of the art world, this time censorship and bullying had been perpetrated by an insider, Douglas, who had done so out of fear that Mabulu's unambiguous comment on the Marikana tragedy might jeopardise Artlogic's relationship with various government institutions – the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Gauteng Provincial Government and the City of Joburg.

To justify his decision Douglas kept reiterating that "he had to balance the interests of all the parities at the fair", as if overlooking the rights of artists and gallerists wasn't in contradiction with this. Nelisiwe Xaba and Moeke J Van Vuuren, the joint winners of the FNB JAF Art Award, made this point when they released a statement to the press during the debacle.

Barend de Wet was the first artist to be censored at the JAF, when he knitted in the buff at the Blank Projects stand a number of years ago. Artlogic stopped his performance. Presumably in reference to that event and his protest against what had occurred with Mabulu, the artist floated through the fair underneath a garish striped knitted blanket-cum garment – a signature of his work. No one tried to lift it to see if De Wet was in fact concealed beneath and possibly naked, yet it was quietly subversive.

Nevertheless, Goldblatt wasn't backed by a large contingent willing to put their heads on the line, proving that the brand of self-censorship that informed Douglas's decision about Mabulu's work ran quite deeply; though, of course, some were silent because they feared being reproached by Douglas.

Essers, whose gallery represents Goldblatt and Murray, is therefore no stranger to dealing with a censor-



In a quiet act of protest, Barend de Wet roamed the fair concealed beneath a striped knitted blanket.

ship battle. She was of the opinion that apathy, too, might have contributed towards the glaring absence of solidarity around *The Spear* debacle and the censorship of Mabulu's artwork.

Privately, artists and gallerists at the fair expressed their support to Greg Dale and Leigh-Anne Niehaus, the gallerists of Commune1, who represent Mabulu. At some stands, such as Rooke & Van Wyk, opinion was split quite sharply down the middle, with Gavin Rooke dismissing the debacle as an attention-seeking act by Mabulu, and his business partner and artist Roelof Van Wyk praising the Cape Town artist for being brave enough within the current climate to make such strong political commentary.

"Art is the only area where you can make political statements like this," observed Van Wyk.

By midday on the Saturday, after the terse tête-à-tête with Douglas and Labuschagne, which resulted in them agreeing to allow Mabulu's work to go on display and Goldblatt agreeing to reinstall his exhibition of photographs, crowds had gathered around the expansive life-like *Yakhali-inkomo (Black Man's Cry)* by Ayanda Mabulu to see what all the fuss had been about. Harmony should have returned to the JAF everything was now back as it should have been from the opening night, but a number of nagging questions or realities persisted.

The true impact of *The Spear* debacle on the art community has yet

# Art & Politics

*The battle over a political work was an unexpected turn at the Joburg Art Fair, but it highlighted the inner contradiction that haunts this event, writes Mary Corrigan*

to be measured. Without Goldblatt's stand it seems unlikely that Douglas would have rescinded his decision – unless other artists or gallerists had acted – proving that calculated acts of solidarity and protest are powerful, though they do require the art community to overcome a seemingly pervasive sense of fear and apathy. More importantly, given Douglas's assertion that Mabulu's political statement "wasn't appropriate for the fair", you had to wonder what is the function of an art fair? And is censorship good for the business of art?

The answer to this should be simple; art fairs are about selling art

and marketing artists, so surely any marketable art products should be able to be sold. To a large degree, gallerists at JAF embrace this function by showing works that are sellable; which seems to mean artists who already have a name; works that are small, thus cheaper and easier to flog; or massive eye-catching works with some buzz around them that might prove collectable in future or lead to other smaller sales.

It was easy to observe these principles in action at this year's fair: William Kentridges were dotted around – a bronze Rebus series at the Goodman Gallery stand, some prints at David Krut's. A JAF isn't a

fair without this ubiquitous figure, who Douglas claims was the only contemporary South African artist the general public were aware of when he started the fair six years ago. Apparently, the public are now more knowledgeable – "they know at least four artists' names", said Douglas, without listing who they might be – Goldblatt could well be on that list.

There were fewer paintings this year compared to previous ones, though the Stevenson Gallery went all-out with a stand devoted to some minuscule portraits by Ian Grose – small works are easier to sell. But that wasn't their only marketable

feature; they had quite a retro feel, being the sort of works you might expect to encounter in a vintage store. In this way they would appeal to those who still have dated ideas about art, believing likeness to be a prized quality, and those who enjoy the ironic contemporary reappropriation of old styles of painting. It was rumoured that every painting on the stand sold.

Photographic works dominated this year, not necessarily because of a market-driven demand but due to Artlogic declaring this year's fair as one dedicated to photography. Hence Goldblatt being selected as the featured artist of the year, Santu Mofokeng's social anthropological project, *The Black Photo Album*, which presents a collection of dated portraits of black people collected by the photographer, and a selection of supposed "African emerging photography" works from the Recontres de Bamako. Given that these three special projects and Roger Ballen's Solo Show in association with the Circa gallery were all retrospectives of sorts, there weren't any surprises, though they may have been revelations for a wider audience.

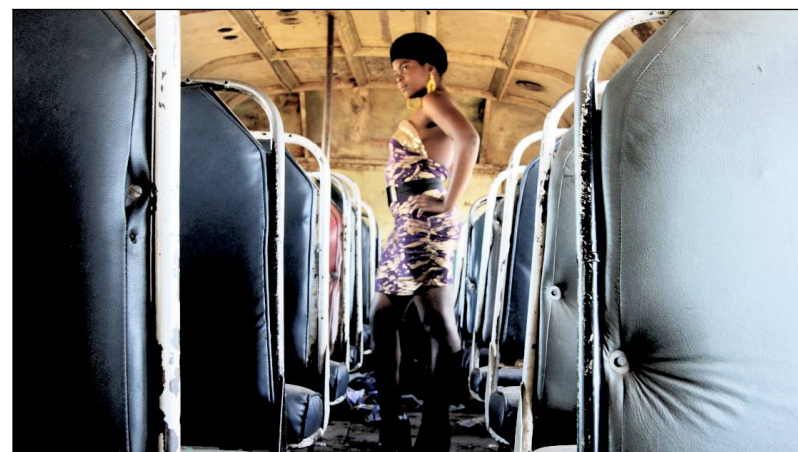
The Recontres de Bamako display was disappointing and predictable in terms of whose work and what kinds of work (an old Zanele Muholi work we have seen over and over – can she really be considered an "emerging artist"?). There were shown. Nandipha Mntambo's photographic project for Pirelli, *...everyone carries a shadow*, also fell a bit flat and came off looking more like a clichéd set of soft porn images rather than a clever intertwining of male and female subjects.

The fair's organisers should be praised for including these special projects, which give artists a chance to colonise an entire stand and establish their voice and expose seminal bodies of work to the public, but in embracing these special projects, they also are attempting to set the fair's function as being educational – though these works are for sale. But nonetheless, the business thrust is accompanied by other objectives, which may or may not be achievable



A Norman Catherine sculpture, *Cogitator*, dominated Everard Read's stand.

PICTURE: THYS DULLART



An image from Nancy Mteki's series of women on public transport at the Empire Gallery's stand

in the context of an art fair. These collections for example, barring Mntambo's, assume an uneducated audience, who would not be aware of these works already. In this way the fair in both its commercial and educational functions is populist by nature.

How does freedom of expression fit into this model? If popular opinion dictates how this fair is shaped, how does an artist aiming to shift it address this at the fair without being kicked out? It's charming to think of the fair as a democratisation of art display where the public vote for the kind of art they like with their wallets, but in the Mabulu instance Douglas didn't give them a chance to do so. So while the art fair might seem to facilitate a shift, steering art away from the rarefied realm of the museum, where it is controlled (and censored) by a few, in reality it is still under the authority of a small minority – the only difference is that now decisions aren't driven by ideas but money.

In fact, the banning of work, as was the case with Murray's contentious *The Spear*, makes it more desirable to the public. As Douglas noted, "controversery sells in this country". He was probably making a dig at the press and Mabulu, but nevertheless it is true of buying patterns where art is concerned. Of course, as the brouhaha over the Mabulu painting demonstrated, Douglas was in fact bowing to the demands of his clients – or at least one of the most influential ones that funds quite a number of

stands at the JAF – the DTI occupied the biggest at the fair. A host of other stands by non-profit arts institutions aimed at development are also funded by government bodies. Is the government the art fair's biggest client? If so, this could prove problematic in terms of the display of political art. It also prompts all sorts of questions about the art fair's target audience. Artlogic's audience might be different to the one that the gallerists or artists have in mind.

It's hard to believe that art buyers or members of the public wouldn't browse or buy at the fair if they were offended by a political artwork.

Not that the production of political art seems to be at an all-time high in galleries or at the fair. Aside from Murray's subversive posters at the Goodman stand that boasted the phrase "Oprah says every revolution evaporates and leaves behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy", there weren't any overtly political works shouting for attention. It's not just that most artists seem to be choosing more subtle means of commentary, but that there has been a shift towards engaging with the form of art. Artists are burrowing into the internal formal substance of their work, revelling in their mediums.

Dan Halter's solo show presented by the Whatiftheworld Gallery presented a fusion between an assiduous development of a visual form, a craft in fact that relies on weaving texts and colours on printed paper,

and addressing political concerns. His labour-intensive method complements his commentary; in *New Identity* he re-creates an ID book cover so that close up it becomes clear that its simplistic appearance and the iconography it carries are the result of a layered, belaboured construction, not just in a physical sense but an ideological one.

Some of the photographic works evinced an articulation of political conditions via the impact on the individual. This was largely achieved through portraiture, such as Mauro Pinto's series on inmates of the Infulele hospital in Maputo who inhabit a dilapidated and dysfunctional state facility.

Robin Hammond presented a haunting image of man emerging from a black background who survived a fire in Zimbabwe in *Your wounds will be named silence*.

The photographic theme of the fair – a category too broad to be of any real significance beyond the superficial – seemed to defy this formalist trend, though it was focused on a particular medium. Photographic work is feeling a bit passé these days, or maybe it's because the photography at the fair was expected, evoking a sort of early period in post-apartheid art involving figuring and representing the self or others. This was evident in Nancy Mteki's series of women on public transport at the Empire Gallery's stand. Valerie Belin, a little-known French artist showing at I love my Job's stand, tackled this theme in a unique manner in her study of mannequins and real people in which the boundaries between the two were blurred.

Echoing this shift in contemporary practice, Mary Sibande's installation of *Non-Winged Purple Beings* at the Gallery Momo stand implied that she, too, is moving beyond picturing the self, something she has been preoccupied with in her *Sophie* series.

One would expect a contemporary art fair to plug into what is happening now in art. Is this due to a lack of insight on the part of Artlogic or are gallerists catering for the wide audience they expect at this event? Perhaps even the fact that a battle around the politics of art and the nature of political art even played out at this seemingly anodyne event substantiates its increasingly important role in defining the contemporary, even if it may turn out to be a sanitised version for the masses that is unlikely to disturb the status quo.

“ Artlogic seems confused about the function of the art fair