

Secrecy surrounds Venice Biennale

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Perhaps administrative bungling may account for a few of the layers in the shroud of secrecy which has been wrapped around the whole affair. Even at the time of writing Van Vuuren (designated by the SAAA as the only person who could comment on the issue) appeared reluctant to put forward his point of view. Despite repeated attempts to contact him, he failed to return my calls.

The Department of Foreign Affairs was similarly unforthcoming. Representative Stefani Oosthuysen referred me to a press release which the Department of Foreign Affairs will apparently be putting out in the near future. In fact there is even a background to this release, which was drafted nearly a month ago. Though on the letterhead of the SAAA, it included a section relevant to the position of the DAC — as established at the meetings between Metz and the SAAA — which, while endorsing South African participation, nevertheless insisted on some interventions.

For instance Metz required the notation of the DAC's concern that the "participation should be as representative as possible and the art works should be decided upon in a non-partisan, transparent, accountable and democratic manner". And further that it "should be used to build unity and common purpose within the artistic community".

With these clauses inserted the press release was handed to the Department of Foreign Affairs on March 2 — supposedly for immediate release.

It is odd that, with the opening of the Biennale barely more than two months away, it should not have been released. Among the other points contained in the press release is the list of artists selected as representatives for the important Parallel exhibition.

As the list stands at present, they are: Penny Siopis, Kare Nel, Malcolm Payne, Willem Strydom, Philippa Hobbs, Norman Catherine, Tony Nkotsi, Tommy Motswai, Pippa Skotnes, Joachim Schonveldt, Tito Zungu, William Kentridge, Helen Sebidi, Noria Mabasa, David Koloane, Andries Botha, Trevor Makhoba, Sue Williamson, Willie Bester, Kendell Geers, Sfiso Kname and Keith Dietrich.

There should have been two other names on the list — those of photographers Santu Mofokeng and David Goldblatt who, despite being selected for inclusion in the group, declined the honour. Their places have been taken by Johannes Maswanganyi and Johannes Segogela.

When asked why he had refused, Goldblatt responded: "I have over the years been subjected to many blandishments by the government ... Until I see a new government in place, I don't want any part of it."

It ought to be noted that most artists are approaching the event with at least a modicum of goodwill, wanting to stress the positives of the exhibition — the fact of the re-entry, the fact that the artistic representation appears more evenly spread than the selection process, the possibilities of making the thing work more effectively in the future — as well as the dangers of making too much of a fuss this time round with the possible result of reimposition of the boycott.

But, in among all the confusion, the questionable faith, the evasiveness, you can see Goldblatt's point.