

Behind Venetian blinds

THE good news is that, after an enforced absence of two decades, South Africa is back at the prestigious Venice Biennale, taking place in June.

Not only will "we" be back at what ranks as one of the top two or three events on the international art calendar, "we" will be back with what ought to have been an almost unprecedented bang. "We" will be celebrating "our" participation on no less than three separate levels within the festival's overall ambit, namely: the usual "national" pavilion, where featured artists Jackson Hlungwane and Sandra Kriel will, so to speak, be carrying the flag; the inclusion of rural Zulu sculptor Bonnie Ntshali in the festival organisers' own *Aperture* exhibition; and finally, a specially mandated *Parallel* survey exhibition of 24 South African artists.

That is the good news. The bad news has already been intimated in the lugubrious rows of inverted commas lining up like truculent soldiers in the preceding paragraphs. Who will be back at the Biennale? Who will be celebrating ... which South Africa's participation?

The point, as artists and art administrators have not been slow to note, is that the way South Africa's re-entry into the Biennale was effected was, from the start, fraught with the kind of difficulties which breed inverted commas. Invitations to the Venice event are extended not to artists' organisations directly but to the governments of participating countries. In the case of most countries this, of course, is neither here nor there; the government by definition represents the country.

In the case of South Africa the government remains the government of white South Africa; it is busy negotiating the state which it represents out of existence; it represents a mere 20 percent of the society as a whole; and so on and so on.

You can run the litany past yourself, noting as you do that South Africa's re-entry into the Venice festival is predicated on the democratic changes taking place in forums where the National Party government is only one among a range of negotiating partners. As one prominent art administrator put it: "On the back of the new South Africa ... the old South Africa rides a gondola into the sunset."

Whatever, it was to the Department of Foreign Affairs that the invitation to participate in the Venice Biennale was extended — in the person of South Africa's ambassador to Italy, Glen Babb. Armed with the invitation the NP government chose not to throw it open to any national negotiat-

South Africa's re-entry into the Venice

Biennale — one of the top art

exhibitions in the world — should

be cause for national celebration.

Instead it has been fraught with
difficulties and shrouded in secrecy.

IVOR POWELL finds out why

ing forum. It chose instead to use the old, tried and mistrusted channels.

Namely the South African Association of Arts (SAAA). For the Department of Foreign Affairs' director general Rusty Evans, a letter signed by an Anton Loubscher was duly dispatched to the president of the SAAA, Louis Jansen van Vuuren. In essence it requested that the SAAA, under Van Vuuren, co-ordinate and organise the South African re-entry into the Venice showcase.

Now the SAAA has been under sustained and more or less systematic attack — which has often spilled over into boycott politics — by what used to be called progressive art and political organisations for upwards of a decade. It can claim only the most minimal black membership and its committee structures are almost all white. Moreover it remains, in terms of its administrative relationships with the government, a white "own affairs" institution in terms of the mercifully lapsing 1985 Constitution.

Nor have those with long cultural memories forgotten that it was the SAAA, then headed by current South African National Gallery director Marilyn Martin and with Van Vuuren on the committee, which in the 1980s organised and promoted participation in the notorious Chilean Biennial — an event set up by

former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet as a kind of international Salon des Refusés of countries rejected for political reasons by the organisers of the Venice Biennale.

Be all this as it may, it is the SAAA which has been running the show — in spite of the fact that Van Vuuren, though SAAA president and the prime organiser of the South African participation, is curiously, along with Martin and Johannesburg cultural director Christopher Till, designated as an "independent selector".

The non-independent selectors appointed from its membership by the SAAA for the purpose of co-ordinating the project at regional levels have (at



Yes and No ... Participating artist William Kentridge sums it all up

the calculated risk of sounding outmodedly racist) one notable thing in common with the independents: they are all white and are all linked either to government or other official institutions.

The point is not as fatuous as it sounds. For example, the selection committee for the Witwatersrand was made up as follows: independent selector Christopher Till, heading a core group which included two employees of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which he as director of culture effectively controls; then, successively co-opted onto the committee in staggered formation as work proceeded, Thupelo Art Project director Bongiwe Dhlomo, artists Durant Sihlale and David Koloane, and finally Tony Nkotsi.

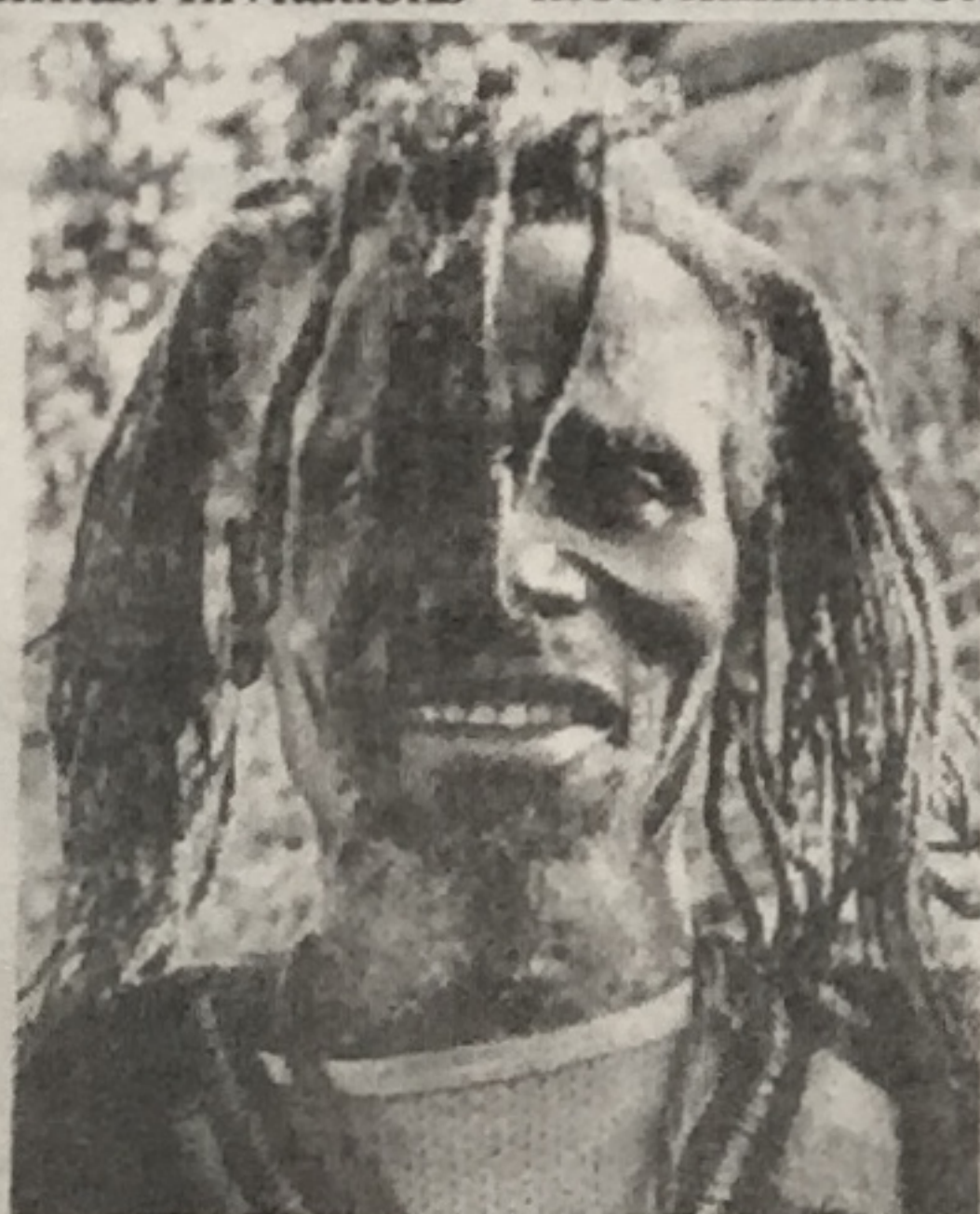
Nkotsi's case is especially illuminating. He was brought in as part of a deal struck between the SAAA and the African National Congress' Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) as a result of meetings in mid-February.

The upshot of these meetings was that, while giving a conditional blessing to the project, the DAC's Gordon Metz had expressed concern at the

lack of representivity in selection structures, and as a result Nkotsi and Cape artist Lionel Davis were brought in to provide some kind of guarantee.

So far so good. Except Nkotsi was notified and persuaded to participate only on the day on which the final selections were to be made, and he was merely required to assist in the fine-tuning of a shortlist of possible candidates for the Parallel exhibition. And of course to lend his name and rubber stamp to the committee list. The tokenism of Nkotsi's involvement was further demonstrated by the fact that the selection deadline as laid down by the Venice organisers had already effectively passed by this time.

Given the tentative nature of Nkotsi and Koloane's involvement in the selection process, one should probably not make too much of what would otherwise seem like blatant nepotism: the fact that both, while being selectors, are also included in the list of participating artists. Said Nkotsi: "I wasn't happy about anything to do with this experience."



Jackson Hlungwane