

Undoing the business of ART

It's not all business at the Joburg Art Fair. Mary Corrigan discovers a number of works that cannot or are unlikely to be bought

IT IS not often that going unnoticed by your audience is a sign that the performance is a success. But such is the case for the initial phase of Murray Kruger's *Business Day Part 2*, which appropriately begins in the swish Wanted/Businessday lounge at the FNB Joburg Art Fair (JAF) at the Sandton Convention Centre. In a pair of black trousers, smart black shoes and a white shirt, Kruger quietly inserts himself into the hustle and bustle of the art fair, immersing himself in a newspaper. He is posing, or should one say, becoming, a businessman, though one could argue that this attire mirrors William Kentridge's characteristic uniform.

His transformation had begun weeks earlier with a succession of haircuts. Finally, this generic businessman coalesced during a shoot for Wanted magazine, where he had been selected as one of the supposed Young African Artists (YAA) – an invented appellation that recalls the Young British Artist (YBA) title that became synonymous with a certain kind of work in Britain in the '90s. In the context of a feature to promote his status, this scheme to pose as someone other than himself is almost self-

defeating – becoming recognisable furthers your success. Certainly, a number of young artists at the art fair were grumbling that they had not been deemed a "YAA".

However, for Kruger, his business, his art, is rooted in playing someone other than himself, so retreating behind a façade is meant to work in his favour. "I don't want people to know me," he observed. Of course, the more known he becomes, the more difficult it will be to camouflage himself, to go unnoticed. For now, the 24-year-old performance artist is a relatively unknown quantity and his marketability in an art fair setting is negligible – performance art can't be traded here, unless it is packaged into a definable object.

The Joburg Art Fair, now into its fifth year, has become a space for artists to attract notice, particularly in the absence of a bullish market for contemporary art at auction. Marketability can be tested here. The artists that galleries choose to show at the fair and what prominence they give them is already an indication of this, though some selected show-stopper pieces are used as a way of drawing attention to their stands. In this way some of the art on dis-



Performance artist Murray Kruger posing as a generic businessman in the performance Business Day Part 2.

play isn't sellable, though it is for sale. Such as Angus Taylor's *Die Omdop Van Doosekerheid*, a large square of rammed earth on a wooden frame, on display at the front of the Everard Read stand. Other galleries, like the Rooke, showed a collection of 1975 Pipeline Gun surfboards decorated by a variety of artists – feathered surfboard anyone? The market for novelty surfboards is probably more substantial than one for a giant cement mixer given an African fetish twist with nuts and bolts by Michael MacGarry. *Future Proof* takes up a small stand and, at R300 000, is not something just anyone would pick up on a whim, yet David Brodie, one of the directors at the Stevenson gallery, isn't both-

ered if it doesn't sell during the fair, as he is sure it will eventually find a buyer. He doesn't view the fair as a space to aggressively sell art.

"Most of our clients don't come to the fair to buy from us, we are already interacting with them so we see the fair as a place to challenge viewers, so less of our focus is on objects and projects instead.

"But I do think you will get more bang for your buck with this baby," he observes, banging on the side of MacGarry's sci-fi sculpture as if it is a washing machine with all the bells and whistles.

Novelty has some importance at the JAF, which has been seen as the comfortable interface between the art world and the public. The public's outcry over Brett Murray's

contentious portrait of President Zuma, his misconstrued motivations and perceptions of the role art plays or should play in a democratic society, highlighted the gap between this rarefied world of art and visual culture on the ground. Bridges need to be built. The R100 entry fee might be a barrier, though school kids can enter for R15.

The organisers, ArtLogic, have often suggested the Sandton setting is ideal for first-timers to engage with art. Here looking at art isn't a loaded act; it's about facilitating, feeling out future transactions, as in the adjoining mall.

In much the same vein as Kruger's performance, the art fair is the art world dressed up in a suit,

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the art world playing at being a business, though in truth it's not a role it is unfamiliar with. But it has a conflicted relationship with its commercial character.

Artists perceived to be adept at exploiting the peculiar business of art or are seen to adopt an overt businesslike approach – hiring staff to produce their work and making calculated gestures that offer good financial returns – are often frowned upon and are deemed to be manipulative, fraudsters even. So it follows that those that excel at the art fair are, to some degree, “looked down” upon.

Ed Young's perceived success at the JAF is a case in point. His miniaturised sculpture of his naked frame, titled *My Gallerist Made Me Do It*, is a hit at the fair. Few visitors left without a photograph of his naked buttocks and the red dots piled up alongside it. This prompted one envious gallerist to observe that the work was “good art fair fare – Ed Young does well at fairs. He is meant for them”.

Interestingly, Young's work engages with this phenomenon; the title suggests that the work was made under duress, that the artist was forced to expose himself for a commercial end. Hence, Young's replica is seen hanging from a hook – the artist is the work.

Attitudes to “art fair art” are linked to the fact that art's value is directly connected to it operating outside of fields of commerce, that it can be distinguished from conventional products and systems of exchange. The presence of artworks at the art fair that are not for sale might be one way of fixing the value of those that are. Kruger's performance art piece is the apotheosis of this kind of “thing”. It cannot be acquired. This was always the goal of performance art, that it would sit outside the art market – now, ironically, it may be used to prop up its status.

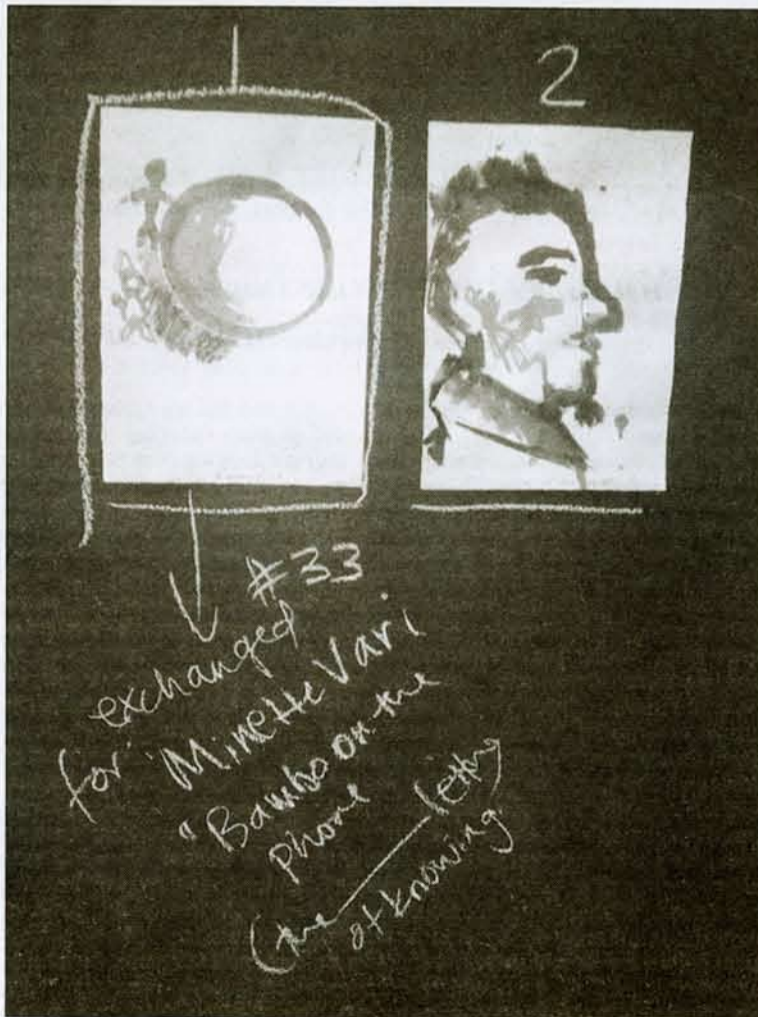
This sense of ephemerality is enhanced by the fact that Kruger's performance is different every day and that the aspect of spectacle attached to it manifests when Kruger is on the move – or partially hidden. When he leaves the business lounge, he walks around the fair with a pot plant. At first he doesn't attract any attention, it is only when he picks up speed and appears more and more dishevelled that his actions seem abnormal. Kruger builds his businessman character as quickly as he implodes it, lets it unravel into a state of chaos, which seems to be brought on by the very strictures that allow him to compose it.

He is, after all, a sham only held together by a good haircut and conservative attire. In this way, Kruger moves between belonging in the space – when he walks through it – and separating from it; once the businessman character gets lost in his activities to the point that they have no meaning, he becomes an alien, an outsider, a spectacle.

Trade Re-Routed by Nontobeko Ntombela presents an activity that operates within the art fair system and breaks with it. Performed by Anthea Moys and Donna Kukama



Bridget Baker stands inside the filmic installation she has created at the fair, where time is slowed down and collapses.



Some of the reinterpretations of valuable works at the art fair in a project called *Trade Re-Routed* by Nontobeko Ntombela.

with Jamie Gowrie and Shannon Ferguson, the project sees artists making renditions of works from the JAF and the Joburg Fringe, an independent commercial initiative

in Braamfontein that coincides with the official fair.

From booths at both settings, the works are then auctioned. For R50 I purchase a rudimentary

drawing billed as a “reinterpretation of a Pieter Hugo work”. This initiative makes a distinction between what makes work worthy at the fair – it must be easy to sell – and the Fringe, “conceptually strong”. Peculiarly, they note that a museum collection is “neither sellable nor art”.

Connecting the Joburg Fringe to the JAF isn't terribly subversive in any way as the former is quite unexpectedly like a mirror copy of the art fair, though less slick. In fact, the Fringe appears to have an even more aggressive commercial thrust. Artists were told that everything they display at the Joburg Fringe must be available for purchase, according to artist Anne-Marie Tully, who begrudgingly placed two artworks for sale that she doesn't want to part with. One is a large portrait of a pet who has subsequently died and another, titled *Curl up and die: the gift*, is a toy kitten made from rabbit hair presented in a perspex case.

A surprising number of works at JAF aren't for sale – they are labelled as “special projects”, ensuring a distinction is made. They are sponsored by a variety of institutions or initiatives. Bridget Baker's *Only Half Taken* is a film installation consisting of two analogue projectors sharing two sets of spliced footage; one found and another shot by the artist. It's a personal work revolving on her late father that evokes broader themes around the politics of revisiting history. One of the striking aspects of the work is the collapsing of time – the present day footage shot by Baker appears analogous to that her late father shot in the 1970s. It's as if he is both dead and alive.

Baker explained that she made every effort to divorce the installa-

tion from the art fair context in order to “change perceptions that are attached to it [the fair]”. Largely, this is meant to heighten the experience of the work and create a context “in which time had slowed down”, opposed to in the fair where there is so much to see and viewing time is sped up.

Kruger's fast-paced laps around the art fair evoke this phenomenon. Fittingly, his performance shifts into another gear when he retreats inside Deborah Poynton's installation *Arcadia*, which like Baker's is designed to block out the art fair setting.

In a barely lit makeshift room hang Poynton's characteristic large-scale hyperrealist paintings. They depict a lush garden, but the poor lighting almost denies the full pleasure of viewing these detailed works; you have to wait for your eyes to adjust to the poor lighting before they become more visible.

It is in this contrived non-art fair space that Kruger disrobes, removing the businessman attire. He isn't just stripping off the character but regressing; in a pair of red underpants he appears like he did in a photograph on a beach as a child, echoing one of the subjects in Poynton's work, a young boy in a pair of swimming trunks. This is the only time in his performance that he engages with an artwork and in such a profound way. He becomes vulnerable before the work, transforming into an object to be seen as visitors' gaze darts between his semi-naked frame and the rich Poynton images surrounding him. His absorption into the spectacle of the art fair is complete, though this time he has entered it from the opposite end; that of an artist/artwork, though you could argue nothing has changed.