

ART TIMES

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SASOL snuffs Wax Award

“When it comes to support for the arts, sustainability seems to become a fickle enterprise. Support for the arts could be dished out and cancelled at the drop of a hat.”

By Johan Myburg

The visual arts have always benefited from patronage.

In Medieval times the church was the grand patron. Many papal whims contributed to some of the greatest art ever created by Michelangelo and his peers. And during the Renaissance flamboyant individuals and or families such as the De Medici's became synonymous with the proliferation of the visual arts. Today corporate sponsorship has taken over the role of institutions offering vital support for the visual arts.

Although these tokens of support and patronage are laudable and indispensable, determining the nature of the relationship between the benefactors and the arts become increasingly important. To what extent have patrons of the arts become patronising? Would one be able to speak of a truly symbiotic relationship between sponsorship and the arts? What constitutes the mutual benefit of this relationship? And is reciprocity regarded important at all?

In South Africa we have witnessed the devastating effects of the abrupt end of the Brett Kebble Art Awards. And recently we have witnessed the end of the Sasol Wax Art Award. No self-respecting corporate institution would operate oblivious to the importance of sustainability.

But when it comes to support for the arts, sustainability seems to become a fickle enterprise. Support for the arts could be dished out and cancelled at the drop of a hat, so it seems. If the chair of

the board has a flair for the arts, sponsorship becomes an avenue for corporate social investment. Should the chair retire, the support dwindles or dries up completely.

If one takes into consideration mutual respect (from the sponsor towards the arts and artists, and from the art world towards the sponsor) the question arises whether the patron is consulting the art world in establishing sponsorship and in withdrawing sponsorship. This could be the case in establishing the award or competition or form of support. But the termination of support seems to be a unilateral decision. The pope has another scheme in mind and the work on the Sistine Chapel comes to a halt.

In an age with accountability and transparency as buzzwords, it seems odd that the visual arts have to be treated as a minor – sponsorship will decide what is beneficial for the arts. They will decide the amount of pocket money that could be allocated to the arts. While the arts sheepishly do their best to promote the image of the sponsor, honouring the obligation to produce quality work so that the sponsor could cash in on publicity and a polished profile as ‘supporters of the arts’.

Perhaps the time has come for the art world to enter proper negotiations with sponsors to secure a fair deal for both. The arts need sponsors. Sponsors need an aesthetic quality to be associated with. No one needs to be reliant on the other.

Artists are professional people and need to be taken seriously.



Painting by Richard Hart: *The illusive deeper of Rita's girls*, Oil on canvass, was one of the works on *Bigwood 2* held at ArtSpace Durban. For more work see: www.artspacedurban.co.za The show will travel to whatiftheworld gallery soon

Strike down capitalism: dump your old art

By Patrick Burnett

You've heard of retreading old tyres, but how about taking your unwanted pieces of art down to the local dealership for a bit of recycling?

While you're doing it you would also be making a statement on the evils of capitalism and the selfishness of art that hides out on the walls of private collections.

A group of Johannesburg artists

have launched a “creative recycling” project that will take privately owned art and recondition it into public works – an idea that if nothing else has stoked debate in the art world. The Joburg Art Bin, the concept of a group of artists known as Empty Office and consisting of Landi Raubenheimer, Paul Cooper and Brenden Grey, and supported by The Bag Factory artist studio, is being described by organisers as a “gesture of resistance to the

privatization of contemporary art”. The collective recently issued a call to private collectors to dump works of art between 18 July and 2 August. A debate on the concept was also held on July 4. The concept of retreading old art has raised concerns ranging from a feeling that the project is a tongue-in-cheek indulgence, to worries about the implications of tampering with art that is located in historical, social and political

contexts.

But the organisers have explained their efforts in the following terms: “The premise behind the project is to problematize the fetishization, instrumentalization, commoditization and privatization of art by generating public art from the physical detritus of privately owned pieces which have been destroyed by their owners.”

They hope to explore how the “meaning and form of a privately owned art object transforms when it is reworked by another artist and re-imagined in a public context”. The proposal is that the recycled art will be used in a series of public art works to be installed in central Johannesburg in preparation for Joburg Art Week and the Joburg Art Fair 2009. Artists will work in collaboration with those who drop off work.

Grey said the project was asking questions about why artists made the work they did and who saw that work and was interested in the dialogue and debate around these questions. He said work was not being defaced but recycled and reconstructed. The Bag Factory education officer Bronwyn Lace said a panel discussion had been held on July 4 to discuss the project. “It was a heated debate and no clear answers were reached...The debate did raise many questions though as to the validity of art in the public realm, whether much of it is truly transformative in nature, the reasons for collecting etc.” Lace said some works had already been deposited but was not able to give details on what would be done with them.

Antoinette Murdoch, CEO of the Joburg Art Bank, which has dropped off some art works, said about 10 pieces had been handed over. She said while it was “an interesting idea”, the bank would not be involved in re-purposing the work and saw it more as a convenient way “to get rid of what you don't want and re-purpose something”. “If it does nothing else but to generate a lot of debate then that is fabulous because I'm so sick and tired of people not debating. If new voices can be heard and people are saying what they think then I think that's fabulous.”

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