

Art and Not Art in Liverpool

Art Not Art

A brief visit, as the Biennial wound down, to a city I'd never visited before – so that I found it difficult to get away from a pressing sense of the place. My first impressions, of the neglected opulence of the Adelphi, of the crowds moving in the dark, November streets beneath the massive monuments to Victorian oligarchy, of a sun, the colour of rust, descending behind Birkenhead – all very atmospheric – set the tone for the visit as a whole. Liverpool is impressive, in the way a shipwreck is impressive. A half-sunk city, still recognisable as the Port of Empire, but abandoned by the captains of industry, so that the centre, at least, appears to have been left entirely in the hands of the ordinary people, the former working-class, immigrants and lower middle-class, making it awkwardly independent and egalitarian. From a number of sources we were told that a regeneration was under way, though walking the streets, many still showing the marks of the Blitz, some damaged by sixties quick-fix reconstruction, all bearing some signs of economic stagnation and dereliction, we could only imagine the effort that would be required to lift the hulk.

'Art' is there to play its part in Liverpool's economic re-emergence: a Tate Modern slipped into the docklands, a Biennial in place and the European Capital of Culture to come in 2008. The advertisements for 2008 are everywhere, suggesting that the city is seriously committing itself to the event and its possibilities: Cork, our hometown and 2005's Capital, seems reserved in comparison. A mechanism for urban transformation, passed down from Greater Europe, is being put in place, and Liverpool joins the list of old industrial ports, once the conduits of continental wealth and power, to be given the Capital of Culture treatment: Antwerp, Rotterdam, Glasgow, Genoa, Patras, on a smaller scale, Cork. Most have taken on their modern shape in the nineteenth century, have enjoyed a modest boom in the sixties, before entering a decline that seemed terminal as European countries adapted themselves to a post-industrial age, which is to say, accepted that most primary and secondary industry would be pursued elsewhere. One by one these

no longer viable 'industrial ports' are to become 'cities of culture', a phrase which suggests a number of over-lapping possibilities, some utopian, some mildly depressing: 'urban museum', 'centre of creativity', 'tourist venue'. In realising these possibilities, however, two factors come into play: the character of the city being 'culturised', and how art, which one imagines retains some modicum of independence from these institutional outlets and sources of funding, is to be used in the process.

Judging by what I saw of the Biennial (in other words I am assuming that a continuity of purpose exists between Liverpool's three main contemporary art institutions – Biennial, Tate and 2008), the process of deciding how Liverpool may take shape as a Capital of Culture is at an early stage. The nexus of investment, cityscape, art and populace is difficult to achieve, and when that investment has not as yet materialised to any great degree (not withstanding certain signs of 'regeneration', especially around the FACT centre), when the cityscape is so massive and individual, and when art and populace have already clashed (over Yoko Ono's mamma-ry, despite its cosmetic inauthenticity and sugary sentiment), the shape of that achievement becomes hard to imagine. The issue was brought neatly into focus for me by a piece in the Internationals section of the Biennial: Paolo Canevari's *Seed*. By suspending a *trompe l'oeil* bomb over Wood Street in the city centre he succeeded in bringing art-work and environment into interrogative unity. By comparison Jorge Pardo's flamboyant *Penelope* and Choi Jeong Hwa's giant blooms in Lime Street Station simply ended up stressing the dislocated quality of global contemporary art: they were alien growths, consciously unrelated to their environment, like multi-coloured *leylandii* offering quick cultural stimulus no matter what the surroundings. The far less ostentatious *Seed*, however, extended twin axes of meaning into the street about it – here was a return of the Blitz, bound-up with a promise of reconstruction, and here was international contemporary art descending from the sky, caught in the moment before it delivered its explosion of urban renewal. A third dimension was added by our visit coinciding with the re-election of George W. Bush: Canevari allowed us to imagine the advent of 'democracy' in Baghdad or Kabul, a sense compounded by knowledge of the artist's staging a similar piece in New York after September 11th. All in all it acted as a question-mark writ large over Liverpool and its

embrace of the contemporary art-economy, making manifest the suspension cables, historical, international and ideological, keeping the apparatus aloft. Canevari is a wry portraitist of the ‘destructive creation’ that has provided the dynamic for global civilisation since at least the days of Liverpool’s becoming a Capital of Empire – it is the virtue of his work that it brings to the fore the ambiguous affiliations of the contemporary art-economic project.

So in certain ways it can be said that Liverpool, awaiting the visit of the global culture-machine, has become an inverted image of its former self. It now represents the local, with all the vices of chauvinism, narrow-mindedness and low standards that word can represent, as well as its resources of creativity, democratic character and sensitivity to place. It is no longer the conduit of colonisation, but an independent city, awaiting what may be a different kind of colonisation. In some respects the organisers of the Biennial seemed to recognise this – it was a noticeable effect of the task of tracking down the various exhibition sites and of the experience of viewing the International pieces that the art continually turned the viewer’s gaze back onto the city. Finding the Independents exhibitions involved walking out of the centre into a district of semi-derelict warehouses; the International exhibits had involved a collaboration between curators and artists, taking ‘affinity for the culture of Liverpool’ as a starting-point, and often showing Liverpool-based images, or references to Liverpool’s history, as an ending-point. Outside you were negotiating the city’s topography, inside you were met with similar negotiations. It was interesting, and certainly opened up one way of relating local and international without introducing obvious hierarchies. I’m not sure, however, that it represented a successful strategy.

Before we’d caught our Ryanair flight, Dobz and I had fished around for opinions on the affair. Two in particular stood out: that the Biennial was a low-key affair, and that the organisers had fundamentally misunderstood the nature of a ‘biennial’. Visiting the Biennial I could see how both attitudes could have been formed and how they were in many ways inter-related. The pieces were low-key *because* they weren’t the kind of work usually presented at a biennial – that is, show-pieces of world art, intended to

communicate a sense of standard and clear progress. The constraints of the ‘affinity with Liverpool’ often meant that the artists’ ‘signature’ works were unlikely to appear, and more modest projects or adaptations of ongoing work for the Liverpool brief took their place. But then it was always unlikely that Liverpool was going to have a ‘biennial’ in the classic sense. Such biennials tend to have continental importance: they mark a shift in contemporary cultural centrality away from the modern art ‘reserves’ of the U.S., and New York in particular, "to pursue globalisation rather than westernisation, diversity instead of uniformity", as the Mayor of Kwangiu put it when inaugurating a biennial for the Asia-Pacific region. They envision a global culture, but one where the U.S.’s dominance is curtailed: art, markets, investment and identity shifting to multiple centres, with Venice as a kind of art gold standard. In short, they mark a coming of age and a growing global confidence of an economic region, not the attempt by an urban locality to regain confidence by taking on the cultural mantle. There we are in the territory of the Capital of Culture. It was interesting, then, that one of the works that did have a ‘biennial’ feel in this sense was Chinese: Yang Fudong’s *Close to the Sea*. This immediately impressive, cinematic piece simply didn’t bother to make any real connection with Liverpool (that both Shanghai and Liverpool are ‘by the sea’ hardly counts), but instead ‘trumpeted’ the cultural confidence of an emerging global power.

Since the eighties, however, the idea of the biennial has been undergoing a sea-change itself, as Claire Doherty pointed out in the November edition of *Art Monthly*.

‘Contextual’ or ‘socially responsive’ biennials have been “[interweaving] themselves into the fabric of the city”, as the organisers of *Berlin Biennale 3* put it, to greater and greater degrees over the past few years, and Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun’s Istanbul Biennial in 2005, as well as the project for Cork’s tenure of the Capital of Culture in which I am involved, the *Cork Caucus*, which is also being guided by Charles Esche, are consciously products of the interaction of invited artists and the realities of the host city. The Liverpool Biennial could certainly be seen in those terms, but not, again, without incurring criticism. If such an interaction is genuinely to occur, it must be understood in advance that there is no easy means of communication between the visitor and the host city, that such immediate crossovers as suggest themselves are hardly likely to be

conducive to engagements of any critical depth. Interaction must be long-term and strategic – it should, in fact, be understood in advance that the very organisation of the event must be self-scrutinising – that it is the first, and possibly most radical step in the process of setting up an apparatus of interpretation of the city. One artist in Liverpool did seem genuinely to attempt to get inside the city’s skin, as it were: Jill Magid’s set of video-works dealing with the panopticon of surveillance technology in the city was developed in conjunction with the police force over a relatively long period of time. But memorable as the results were, their social content was more than a little bizarre, with the deeply problematic ubiquity of closed-circuit cameras simply providing Magid with the means to becoming the heroine in her own *intimiste* movie. Without a conscious structure of engagement in place, ‘social responses’ will naturally become a grafting of the artist’s agenda onto the environment to hand, without real encounter.

Liverpool, it seems to me, contains resources that could provide such a structure of engagement, but they are actively ‘disengaged’ by the current formation of the Biennial. The populist and independent character of the city, as well as its economic underdevelopment – ensuring that a large number of appropriate spaces are available for non-commercial pursuits – has meant that at ground level the city is bubbling with group-artistic activity. Outside of our meeting Static, who provide the forum for this review, and Jump Ship Rat, who had organised a mini-biennial of their own, with an impressive display of Columbian art in their warehouse galleries, we continually stumbled across pamphlets, advertisements and posters for small cultural groupings. Yet the organisation of the Biennial, which had separated off the Independents to their own quarter, with their own funding body (the mysterious A Foundation), had in advance cut out the possibility of this indigenous ferment becoming the source of a dialogical mode of connection between the international contingent and the city. Instead, a number of collaborations with school-children had been devised, fine in their own way, but hardly conducive to two-way conversation. There’s a simple reason why totalitarian states were fond of cultural programmes in primary schools, and why states committed to democracy prefer the model of debate and argument between socially aware groups of adults.

During my brief stay in Liverpool this was where I felt the strength of the city lay, in its overlooked spaces, its critical awareness and its obstinate independence. It's possible, of course, that the groups organising themselves at ground-level might not be too ready to become integrated into the strategies of the big institutions, but if there is resistance it is a resistance built into the experience of the city. In other words, it too must form part of the process of engagement between art international and creativity local. Peter Hall, while presenting some rather generalised models of 'capitals of culture' to the Cork movers and shapers last month, did make the important point of stressing that the only way to generate such levels of creativity was to think of such events as 2005 or 2008 as occasions of *active*, rather than *passive*, culture, that is, to refer to Canevari again, a matter of the ground rising to meet the bomb. It is important, as well, that it should be difficult to imagine what such an encounter would be like and that events between now and 2008 should act as raids into that territory of imagination.

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