

Pleasant Street Revisited: A Discursive Commentary on the Liverpool Biennials, 1999-2004

David Briers

Perhaps there is always a pretext for attending the Liverpool Biennial, different to the ostensible motive for being there.

I decided to visit the 2002 Liverpool Biennial on the day that there was a launch at the former Pleasant Street Board School of a project by the Henry Moore Foundation Contemporary Projects to turn the early 19th century building into a temporary exhibition space. There was a promise of some food and drink, and the possibility of meeting people. It would break up the day nicely.

None of the artists' installations at the Pleasant Street School has remained in my memory. Except, that is, for the office of the Volksboutique, an installation by the Brooklyn artist Christine Hill. The Volksboutique is a self-invented 'label' used by Hill since 1995 for projects which "take forms that are recognisable in everyday life, and bend them slightly to make them individual".

The Volksboutique Accounting Archive that Hill had set up in a room at the Pleasant Street School operated from the premise that "whereas the initial definition of accounting invokes financial issues, this model maintains that biographical experience and personal revelation are real currencies. They have trade value. They are worthy of being accounted for." A proper office had been set up for this purpose, right down to the appropriate office furniture, stationery, eraser-tipped Volksboutique pencils, and an accounting clerk wearing sensible clothes. It was, comfortingly, fifty years out of date, employing real redundant office equipment and stationery graphics from old trade catalogues. It evoked the accounting office of an old-fashioned department store or shipping company.

I wanted to be there, to make a deposit. But I also wanted some lunch. So I schmoozed pleasantly with the British art world, and drank several glasses of socially lubricant champagne. Returning to the Volksboutique Accounting Office, I sat down, completed an account record form, formally deposited it and was given a neat receipt. I cannot recall exactly what I wrote on the form, except that it was a confession that my visits to places around Great Britain to see and write about art exhibitions were really pretexts for visiting cheap second hand bookshops. I ventured the theory that this addiction to buying printed matter in second hand bookshops and charity shops for as a little as possible was a sort of alchemical quest to locate the greatest wisdom in the humblest of forms - books that had completely surrendered any financial value, but that in inverse proportion had accumulated other sorts of value.

Hurrying to this event at the Pleasant Street School, I wrote, I had stopped briefly to indulge this tendency outside one of the few remaining second hand bookshops in the centre of Liverpool – North West Books on Seel Street. Hastily trawling the irresistible boxes full of printed flotsam for 50p an item that were usually stationed outside the shop, I disinterred a Terraphone Tourist Language Course called *Let's Speak German*. Cheaply produced and minus its spine, this 1962 publication incorporated four 33 1/3rpm flexidiscs laminated on to crudely stamped out discs cut from indistinct black and white photographs of picturesque views in Germany (“If you do not possess a gramophone yourself you will no doubt be able to borrow one”, assures the Introduction). Now I was happy, I could go and see art.

The architect Will Alsop thinks that the tenor of a new building can be assessed by a visit to its toilets. In like manner a city can be judged by its second hand bookshops and other places where used books can be bought or scavenged. The decline and closure of cheap second hand bookshops in Liverpool’s city centre has proceeded in parallel with the unstoppable commercial gentrification that is under way in the city. According to Liverpool City Council the Liverpool Biennial “mirrors, and in a way helps to accelerate the regeneration and new confidence of the city.” The artists who take part in the Biennial

are complicit with this regeneration process from which they will eventually and inevitably be summarily removed, and from which they will not benefit.

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“If Hitler were alive today he would be 113...”

The last time I entered North West Books that was what an elderly gentleman visitor was in the course of saying (at the same time as consuming his packed lunch) to Jimmy Burns the proprietor. Situated behind a door still bearing the sign for Worralls’ Auctioneers and Valuers of Fine Art, North West Books was ordered enough to inspire confidence but chaotic enough to invite ferreting in boxes and piles as well as along shelves. It was a treasure house of forgotten volumes, marginal knowledge, abandoned pamphlets and unread poetry, waiting for owners like old dogs at a rescue centre. There used to be shops like this in most cities. Now they remain only in places off the regenerational beaten track, like Llandudno, Halifax, Scarborough, or Sleaford. Between this Biennial and the last, North West Books closed. According to *Nerve Magazine* Issue 4, “Jimmy Burns who had been running one of Liverpool’s premier second hand bookshops for over a decade... was told his shop was being turned into a wine bar called ‘Moods’. Angrily Jimmy told us before he was forced out *‘the second hand book trade might seem like nothing to people with money, but the cornerstone in any culture is the written word. The possibility of decent cheap books is very important to pensioners, those on low incomes and students. All this hype about the City of Culture... for me and many other small shop owners is like one sick joke’.*”

The quarter of central Liverpool bounded by Hanover Street, Berry Street and Bold Street exercises a considerable allure for those attracted by marginal things. During the 1960s I first experienced its juxtaposition of street corner bars, missions for the homeless, shops selling Roman Catholic gewgaws, dealers in used goods, the Liverpool Academy - all faded, somewhat desolate and decaying, but all the same still alive. The area still

manifests something of this character, having changed only slowly during the ensuing decades, simply surrendering to the effects of urban entropy. Just the sort of *quartier* that artists at that time would be likely to infiltrate to work, scavenge and socialise, and they did. The Arena Studios are still there, and on Slater Street an artists' supplies shop rubs shoulders with a Christian bookshop, a club vinyl collectors shop, and probably the cheapest place in town to get an all-day breakfast, all day. What makes this area so poignant is that (like the equivalent Barrio Alto and Alfama districts in Lisbon) it is part of the city centre, like a mirror inversion of the directly adjacent chain store shopping area. In Liverpool until now, the margin has been at the centre.

But such an environment is not what the regeneration planners want. It will only attract cult tourists like those who go to Gateshead to see the car park that featured in *Get Carter*, rather than those who go there to visit the Baltic. As Liverpool moves steadfastly towards the Holy Grail of the Capital of Culture 2008, the area is undergoing a relentless onslaught of sweeping away, tidying up, smoothing over, and above all capitalising. The 1788 Roman Catholic church of St. Peter on Seel Street, last occupied by the city's Polish community, was empty and mysteriously decrepit for some years. During the 2002 Biennial the church was opened up and used for a group exhibition of art about religion as part of the Biennial's Independent programme. During this year's Biennial the church was closed and surrounded by boards announcing that it was 'To Let: Suitable for Restaurant, Leisure, Offices or Gallery Space'. The *Your Move* Liverpool property magazine now describes this area as being "renowned for its upbeat vibe, bohemian feel and sense of diversity". Official art is there even before retailing. Jorge Pardo's "public sculpture" *Penelope* has imposed itself inexcusably and prosaically on the marginal environment of nearby Wolstenholme Square.

Planned regeneration produces non-places (as defined and described by Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, 2004), which we experience "as if between immense parentheses". Non-places are not only airports and transport interchanges but also new arts centres and chain bookshops. FACT is a non-place (its main concourse engenders very much the same feeling as being in the new

shopping concourse at Manchester Piccadilly train station). Watching Yang Fudong's video installation at FACT during this year's Biennial, you could have been absolutely anywhere in the world.

The Bluecoat arts centre – an important partner in the International programme of the Liverpool Biennial – is about to enter into an extended period of refurbishment and extension, with all the signs of transforming internally into a non-place. Even though in terms of its gallery provision and population of disparate traders and tenants it has become an arts centre that time forgot, this impending development will see the displacement or cessation of a number of resident activities that are messy and/or old fashioned. Not many visitors notice the door bearing the sign 'Merseyside Forum for Sculpture, Painting & Allied Crafts' and a Latin motto at the rear entrance of the Bluecoat opposite that of the chic, modern Bluecoat Display Centre. This was the studio of Herbert Tyson Smith (1883-1972), the Liverpool sculptor and monumental stonemason, and it is still a working studio, providing an informal training in traditional stone carving for young adults. But the new Bluecoat will not be able to prolong the active life of this hands-on anomaly without sealing it and burying it like a time capsule, or literally moving it, like the old pub they lately moved half a mile away from its original location in the centre of Manchester.

Two other activities currently resident at the Bluecoat will move out – the in-house bookshop selling remaindered arts and humanities books (usually my first port of call at the Bluecoat), and the periodic 'book fairs' held by a clique of dealers in used books in the Sandon Room at the Bluecoat. 'Book fair' is a rather grand name for these events, where a large clutch of homeless books can be acquired for an outlay of a few pounds - much less than Oxfam prices.

At the other end of School Lane to the Bluecoat is Quiggins, a large warehouse providing space for 50 small traders who employ 250 workers in a 1960s style mixed economy of handmade garments, club vinyl, and retro design. There is also Jim's Emporium, a small shop crammed with ephemera and books, all scruffily but conscientiously classified by its

owner, a man of a certain age. During this Biennial I paid a visit to Jim's Emporium, leaving with a carrier bag full of books, including *Alan Works with Atoms*, a proof copy of a career guidance book from 1962, framed as a novel, as curiously unreadable and as out of time as a book of 19th century sermons, despite having been published only forty years ago.

Quiggins is threatened with closure. It is sited within the Paradise Street Development Area, a major new build shopping quarter planned by Liverpool Council and placed in the hands of the Duke of Devonshire's Grosvenor Estates company. Jim was in the course of marking down his entire stock of books to half price, planning soon to close down his modest business, regardless of whether or not Quiggins survived. He was just giving up. "The whole of the centre is going to be nothing but hotels, bars and restaurants", Jim told me. "There's still a good second hand bookshop in Southport, near the market, opposite a shop selling ladies' lingerie. What I mean is, they talk to you in there. They don't just show you the price and take the money."

At Henry Bohn Books they still talk to you. Henry Bohn's used to be on the corner at the other end of Seel Street, crammed with stuff, including a large number of cardboard boxes of LPs on the floor containing much of what classical vinyl record collectors call 'rare repertoire'. That shop closed, but relocated just outside Lime Street station. It opens late, and closes late too, a haven in the early evening for men to cluster around the table at the far end of the shop and talk about books, politics, CD opera sets.

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I contacted the office of the Volksboutique in New York, to try and track down the exact wording of the account I had deposited at their temporary office in Liverpool in 2002. I received a reply straight away, from the artist Christine Hill, to tell me that my text had certainly been archived, but that at that time she was working in Germany, and the archive was in New York. But responding to a brief description of my predilection for seeking cheap used books wherever and whenever she suggested that I might like to go to

a “sketch of a website” (www.ineradiblestain.com/interstitiallibrary/) run by herself and the writer and artist Shelley Jackson, devoted to their collaborative project, ‘The Interstitial Library, Circulating Collection’.

This Library comprises “the entire floating body of documents at large in the world.” It is “located at no fixed site. Its vast holdings are dispersed throughout private collections, used bookstores, other libraries, thrift stores, garbage dumps, attics, garages, hollow trees, sunken ships, the bottom desk-drawers of writers, the imaginations of non-writers, the pages of other books, the possible future, and the inaccessible past.” The many sample categories of interstitial books given include “Those that have not been opened in fifty years” and “Those that have been chewed by children or dogs”. I have for many years obviously been running my own branch of the Interstitial Library.

Hill and Jackson observe that books discarded by the established, institutional libraries “re-enter the slipstream as used books, where they can be resurrected – thanks to the Interstitial Library”. “The slow circulation of books through private collections, the revival and reinvigoration of institutionally overlooked or despised works through the efforts of fans, the accidental preservation of ephemera through carelessness and packrattyness, as well as other out-of-favor, idiosyncratic, and variously sub-radar texts, all represent a vast and even superior resource.”

Hill and Jackson propose the redefinition of activities like accidental browsing, misshelving, and indiscriminate hoarding as primary, not marginal methods of “information retrieval”. They do not consider the established taxonomies of library classification systems to be superior to private ones. “We contend that the question of what matters and what does not is a political and philosophical one that should be open to the input of individual readers.” Exactly the same, transcribed to an environmental context, could be said of the balance between the institutional and interstitial aspects of the Liverpool Biennials.

The two art works that stick in my mind from the 1999 and 2002 Liverpool Biennials were encountered by accident, on my way out of Liverpool. They were both part of the Independent programme of the Biennial, modest and marginal in nature, and didn't leave much of a trace in the Biennial's history.

In Lewis's department store on Ranelagh Street during the 1999 Biennial three artists "insinuated their work into the infrastructure of the retail environment." In amongst the make-up counters and soft furnishings Mark Pearson had set up a small seating area, constructed from unpainted plywood and occupied with large cushions and magazines to read. A flagpole surmounted this unpretentious enclosure, which was designated "a temporary republic, a separatist environment free from the normal fixtures of consumerism".

During the 2002 Biennial I encountered a small girl sitting cross-legged like a beggar on Renshaw Street, in the centre of the pavement. She was wearing a workman's jacket and protective hat bearing the words THE ENCHANTER. With a small brush she was carefully coating with gold paint the flattened pieces of discarded chewing gum that had adhered to the pavement.

The Biennial wants it both ways. The International wants to appropriate the provisional, non-requisitioned status of interventions such as these, without relinquishing any of its status. The electric refuse collection vehicle provided for the Tijuana-based Torolab group during the 2004 Biennial as a mobile base from which to sell independently produced Latin American records and T-shirts did not look right. It looked like something that had been rigorously checked by Health and Safety. It wanted to look like a small stall selling pirated CDs on a street corner in Montenegro.

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In 2002 I visited a vacant garage on Parr Street used as a temporary project space by the Jump Ship Rat artists' group to show work by Vietnamese artists. A young man hired

temporarily as an invigilator for the Biennial was standing by an open back door, looking out. I was curious to look too, so I asked him, “Can I see what’s out there?” “Sure” he said, “There’s trees, and some beautiful butterflies, and there are thrushes there too. They’re an endangered species you know. I know all the wildlife around here.” I saw a narrow, cramped, cobbled passageway between buildings, with feral shrubs sprouting from the walls.

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