

‘Feedback-Loop’: Liverpool Biennial 04 Still Under Construction.

John Byrne

Three players sat at a table. Before them the art world was laid bare in its sheer simplicity. Each, like the gods of Olympus in some 1950’s epic, cast their die, moved their pieces and strategically engaged in the money-spinning monopoly world of the Biennial ‘art’ circuit. Two of the players - Lewis Biggs, Chief Executive of the Liverpool Biennial and Tim Marlow, Director of Exhibitions and Artists Liaison at White Cube - had joined Navin Rawanchaikul to play his latest artwork ‘SUPER(M)ART – How to be a Successful Curator: A Survival Game’. The game itself allowed participants to role-play as competing freelance international curators in a monopoly type board game environment. In front of the players a camera crew patiently recorded their words and actions whilst a migrant band of ‘press’ gathered curiously before quietly drifting off to look at more ‘art’. I watched, as the scene unfolded, through an internal glass door of Liverpool Tate. In my hand I held the research for one of the three exclusive interviews that the film crew had been granted with Yoko Ono later that day. Yoko Ono – herself the quasi-controversial ‘centrepiece’ of Liverpool Biennial 04 – was visiting the Tate Liverpool later that day in one of the worst kept secrets imaginable. During all of this a thought had occurred to me. What I was witnessing, and participating in, was a cultural ‘Feedback Loop’, a closed circuit relay in which the structures of display, evaluation and information dissemination were present to themselves and each other for a short period of time.

I was myself participating in Liverpool Biennial 04’s ‘feedback-loop’ on several distinct, though related levels. On one level I was providing research for a Liverpool broadcast company ‘Broadside Films’ who had a commission from UK’s Channel Five to produce a half-hour documentary ‘Tim Marlow at the Liverpool Biennial’. The project had appealed to me as it provided a valuable insight into constructing a ‘narrative fiction’ of the Liverpool Biennial for an eager ‘popular’ audience of viewers who would probably

never visit the exhibition themselves. This idea of helping to construct the Biennial, by providing a virtual access to the event had, on another level, been on my mind as I accepted the commission to write this article for 'Press Corps'. On another level, I had already been involved in previous Liverpool Biennials through contributions to their education programmes, organising events, chairing talks and seminars, participating in talks and seminars, and generally encouraging my students at Liverpool John Moores University to participate in the event as fully as possible.

This is not a unique position. In an arts festival as large as Liverpool Biennial 04 there are thousands who participate and interact in the production of the event. From Chief Executives and Freelance Intentional Curators, to local artists and community groups, all present a shifting and complex framework within which the experience of a Biennial takes place. However, what I wish to examine in this article is not simply how the context of this or any other Biennial may affect the audience's experience of the artworks on display - but how the meanings and reception of such artworks are also actively and continually produced within the process of such a cultural milieu.

Whilst none of this is news, I'm still intrigued by the lingering assumption – or it may now be just the lazy and uncritical shorthand – that events somehow 'happen' and are reported 'upon' to 'audiences'. It is no longer the lack of complicity in the active production of culture that worries me in such equations; it is the wilful abdication of responsibility by those who still cling to them which irks. In the continual media 'feedback-loop' of culture, within which we now all live, it seems to me that it is no longer only a cultural elite who cling to the notion of a high and implacable art – but a growing posse of disenfranchised artist who, confronted with the increasing possibility of participation and critical engagement, would prefer to crawl to the derelict safety of an 'art for art's sake' ivory tower. In order to shift the ground away from overly simplistic arguments of 'for' or 'against' in this or any other event or Biennial, I would initially like to continue an examination of the metaphor of the 'feedback-loop'.

I.

'Feedback-Loops' were a technique used quite commonly in early experimental video practice. The activity consisted of positioning a video camera so it pointed directly at a monitor which, in those days, was more often than not a household television screen. By hooking up the camera's live feed to the TV monitor itself, one initially saw an image of that monitor appear on its own TV screen. The feedback time from the camera recording of the image to its playback on the monitor display is never instant. As a result, the video 'self-reflection' of the original monitor replays itself until one eventually sees a series of increasingly smaller monitors which appear on the screen to be moving off into the distance. This obvious illusion, I would argue, presents us with an intriguing metaphor for reading the multi-layered complexities of representation and re-presentation that both construct the contemporary art world and allow increasingly fragmented audiences to participate in this experience. What can often appear as the simple presentation of an already fixed set of meanings, through an ordered hierarchy of information dissemination, is in fact an illusion caused by the solipsistic and self-referential systems of a highly defined cultural discourse. The clarity of process and the seamless unfolding of critical distance which appears on the metaphoric screen of the cultural 'feedback-loop' is an illusion. It is an illusion which gives lie to the seemingly impartial participation of its observers in the true production of their own meaning.

In the case of Liverpool Biennial 04 it would be plainly naive to conceive of such an event in terms of the presentation of a finished art show to a diverse global audience through a linear process of international, national, regional and local communications networks. Surely the meaning of any Biennial or similar art event is produced - rather than projected - through contemporary networks of media communications. If this seems obvious, and I'm sure it does, then why is it now so common to hear repeated criticisms that more or less condemn biennials for trying to do something more than simply present objects of good art (whatever that may mean).

Take for example Adrian Searle's Guardian article 'Visual arts: Scouse stew' (Guardian, 21 September, 2004, p.14). Here, Searle initially points to the endemic problem of an increasing number of intentional biennials showing more or less the same kind of art. For Searle, the celebration of culturally specific difference has been clearly superseded by the endless indifference of 'international' art which, like 'international' cuisine, serves up the same kind of menu wherever it appears. In opposition to this, Searle points to the recent trend of international biennials to 'produce work in response so the social conditions of the location, work that makes some attempt to engage the specifics of place and history, the dynamics of context.' Searle argues, however, that such 'social engagement doesn't necessarily mean engaging art: It can mean boring art'. On this, I would agree.

Commenting on Yoko Ono's inclusion in the Biennial, Searle suggests that it may largely have been due to the fact that she was John Lennon's widow. His response to her work - consisting mainly of badges, banners and souvenir carrier bags which were distributed around the city depicting female breasts and pubis - was that it was slight. On these two points I would also agree. However Searle, like most critics, offers no real alternative to this problematic besides his proclamation that Yang Fudong's work 'Close to the Sea' is both a 'tour de force' and the 'only truly major work in this biennial'. Whilst I would once again agree with his taste on this issue, that is all this is, an issue of taste. What started out as an article by Searle which raised promising issues surrounding the complex nature of contemporary art practice, the blandness of its rootless internationalism and the difficulties of more subject specific agendas of commission and curation, quickly deteriorated into an overly simplistic choice between good and bad. When considering Fudong's work, the earlier suggestion that localised curatorial policies have led to the production of average work was conveniently left out of the equation. Fudong's piece was subject to the same curatorial and commissioning processes as all the other works in the International strand of Liverpool Biennial 04 - its just that Searle happened to like it the most.

One has to be careful when bemoaning curatorial initiatives, however inadequate they appear to be, of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Hankering for the good old days of an agenda free age - in which good art was good art – simplifies and objectifies a complex process and substitutes the illusion that pre-packaged biennials are simply presented for public appraisal. This is to substitute the subtleties and complexities of a cultural ‘feedback loop’ for the simplistic illusion of progression and correspondence which appears on its own media screen. Such familiar manoeuvres allow critics to simultaneously appear to be engaged in the subjective process of producing meaning whilst simultaneously glossing this over with the distanced objectivity of the cultural anthropologist. My argument is simple. If we approach highly complex and sophisticated arenas of debate, such as Liverpool Biennial 04, armed only with the yardstick of taste and the guidebook to ‘good art spotting’, we not only do disservice to the role and function of such events - we crucially deny ourselves the role and function of active participation within local, national and international ‘feedback-loops’. In the light of this, I would like to return to the beginning of this article and to Navin Rawanchaikul’s artwork ‘SUPER(M)ART – How to be a Successful Curator: A Survival Game’

II.

In the catalogue accompanying the ‘International’ exhibition of Liverpool Biennial 04, Laura Briton, herself a curator of ‘Public Programmes at Tate Liverpool’, makes this astutely open ended statement about Navin Rawanchaikul’s ‘SUPER(M)ART – How to be a Successful Curator: A Survival Game’

Rawanchaikul’s glossy ‘edutainment’ product, available for sale, nevertheless taps into a fascination with the glamour of this elitist community. The environment he creates is slick and professional. The issues he raises are particularly pertinent to Liverpool and the Liverpool Biennial. Rawanchaikul builds the fact that the city has recently been awarded the status of European Capital of Culture 2008 into the narrative of his work. What does it mean to be a Capital of Culture? How does art relate to culture? How, in a global economy, do art, culture and money interrelate?

Wisely, Briton does not attempt to answer these questions. Instead, she merely points out that

His work is self-reflexive, a microcosm of the very world in which he, as a contemporary artist, is a player. Ironically, it sets up a mirror to the systems of patronage that support and secure his own success.

We are back in the illusory world of the cultural ‘feedback-loop’. It seems simple enough for Rawanchaikul to critically distance himself from the art world he inhabits by holding up a mirror to reflect its systems. But artworks, Biennials and ‘feedback-loops’ do not really work like this. They are much more complicated and diffuse than their appearance on their own monitor would lead us to believe. And, as such, they are far too embedded in the means of their own production to ever imagine that they can escape this loop.

The clean image of the art world narcissistically representing itself for impassioned public consumption is too neat. The fantasy depends on an opening up of internalised mechanisms, the laying bare of systems of selection, evaluation, distribution and display in some kind of cruel parody of the ‘behind the scenes – how it was made’ DVD option. Yet the art world’s preferred relationship to its public here is to remain at a distance – as a cultural ‘wish image’ of itself. The ‘slick environment’ which Rawanchaikul creates, one must remember, is only equivalent to the ‘fascination with the glamour of this elitist community’ that audiences are expected to expect. This access is no access at all. It is simply a window onto an art world which now sees itself as being as glamorous, sexy and chic as the artworks themselves – an art world which is increasingly content to present itself as its own work of art. This, I would argue, is the key to why so many international biennials look the same – because they are. And the result of this? The usual clamour for the good old days of a purely agenda free art world’s content, if it is to have any, will be timeless, limitless, transcendent, non-culturally specific and, in a paradoxically ironic twist, plainly ‘international’.

III.

So what of the ‘Scouse Stew’ of Liverpool Biennial 04 and its much vaunted ‘International’ strand. According to Searle, the decision to invite four researchers to nominate artists who would visit Liverpool and make works based on their responses to the city fell short, leaving us only with ‘attempts to be relevant’. Clearly, the expedient increase in Biennials has, as Searle argues, caused a clamour to be local – provincial even – in the face of an increasingly blurred and confused role of art in contemporary culture. True, many of the works in Liverpool Biennial 04 could have been made anywhere and for anyone. They appear to me as a kind of ‘airport art’. As the instantly recognisable hinterland of the intentional terminal becomes a beacon of stability in a shifting world of image, it is comforting to know that a growing number of artists are making a living by producing work that could seamlessly decorate such an oasis and still leave you wondering what country you’re in. It is perhaps due to the very parochial nature of Liverpool’s own airport that it, as well as the art it contained by Yoko Ono, both trade on the name and misty memory of John Lennon.

But this criticism could only be put down to lack of effort and imagination on behalf of the artists and not to the ideas of engagement which lay behind the curatorial process itself. On the other hand, those works of art which dealt in the clumsy rhetoric and overt stereotypes of poor communities and references to the Slave Trade were equally not the fault of the initial curatorial process. If some artists wished to take the opportunity to secure their position within the international economy of ‘off the shelf’ Biennial art, whilst others could not see beyond the blatantly obvious to the truly specific, it was still a diverse and controversial show. If parts of the Biennial lacked coherence it was, quite simply, because it wasn’t there. If Liverpool 04 looked like several different ‘art worlds’ had been brought together it was, again quite simply, because they had. Let’s not forget that, as well as the ‘International Programme’, visitors to Liverpool Biennial also had the opportunity to view the John Moores 24 exhibition, the Bloomberg New Contemporaries and a vast range of individual and group exhibitions which constituted the Biennial’s ‘Independent’ programme.

The co-existence and interdependence of so much diverse work, under the umbrella of Liverpool Biennial 04, obviously meant that it could not simply be viewed as coherent. The sheer variety of contemporary works on display meant that they were simply not reducible to each other. The lack of common denominators here called for a press and publicity response that would begin to engage with such a range of work in an equally diverse and sophisticated way. This does not mean that all the works presented during Liverpool Biennial 04 were good – far from it. It just means that a false coherence of such a broad project cannot be gained from the simple imposition of a negative journalistic framework. There was no common denominator to unite the works at Liverpool Biennial 04, no benchmark standard by which the works could be seen to stand or fail. What did unite all the projects within Liverpool Biennial 04 – curated, commissioned or not – was the very stuff that living culture is made of: a ceaseless search for the production of meaning itself. And here the activity of self-legitimation does not necessarily mean solipsistic naval-gazing. Rather, it means the drawing and re-drawing of both critical distances and critical equivalences between and beyond accepted forms of artistic practice.

It is only through continual practices of negotiation, contestation and debate that the well policed borders and boundaries of traditional cultural difference can actively be brought together in a constantly reshaping, shifting and mutable dynamic.

In this way, the cultural ‘feedback-loop’ would no longer rely for its own credibility on appearing to be a clear, organised and coherent image leading off into a predetermined future. Instead, it would in effect become what it already is – a shifting interplay of related activities in which artist, artworks, curators, journalists and audiences actively participate in producing and re-producing the meaning of a collective culture. Perhaps the best possible task that Liverpool, as nominated ‘European Capital of Culture’, could undertake would be to offer itself as a provisional map to the production of a dynamic terrain of multi-cultural interaction. Of course to say this is to imagine that Liverpool is somehow a single voice or person with advanced cultural cartographic skills. In reality,

the true job of all those cultural produces who would associate themselves with progress would be to continue the critical debate, caused in no small way by the reception of Liverpool Biennial 04, to continue unabated. It is far too easy to continually fall back into the self-defeating belief that culture is produced somewhere else by somebody else - that our comfortable role is to criticise its appearance and wail in the romantic self isolation and indulgent misery of our supposed exclusion. The opportunity to contribute is there, we should take it now.

Footnote:

I would like to thank both 'Broadside Films' and my students at Liverpool John Moores University for their active conversations and debate that have directly helped me to form, re-form, solidify and dissolve many of the ideas that appear in this article

John Byrne is a Lecturer at Liverpool School of Art & Design. He writes often about the history and theory of technology, aesthetics, and reproduction. His essays have been published in Third Text. Byrne was a consultant on Tim Marlow on the Liverpool Biennial, broadcast on Channel Five.

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