

Talking up the social

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In the foreword of the Liverpool Biennial International 04 catalogue, Lewis Biggs, Chief Executive and Declan McGonagle, Chair of the Trustees, claim to have positioned the event as an exploration of *'the new possibilities for the transaction between art and society'*¹. It seems that they regard the event as providing an opportunity for a critical discussion about art and its relationship to the social and cultural relations of Liverpool. In an attempt to understand the aim of the event, we examine the position of the organizers and discuss the potential for such events as a site in which to discuss the relationship between art and the social.

The opening statement for the International 04 visitors' guide declares that:

*'The identity of the city is relational, determined at the point where the ambitions of its residents meet the projections of visitors from other places. The International 04 arises out of conviviality, but embraces contradiction as something vital to the negotiation of meaning and value in civil society.'*²

In this and similar statements, the curators of the International 04 declare their interest in, and engagement with, the city as a social place. Yet the statement is ambiguous; the term 'civil society', is not defined nor problematised in terms of any specific social and cultural division or the complexities that these divisions bring. By using the word 'conviviality', the emphasis is placed upon commonality; suggesting that Liverpool's residents and visitors hold an equal status and relationship to the city. The statement points to the flattening out of differences and absorbing of conflicts, an assertion that there is one public and that this public, is without friction or disputes. Furthermore, the curators of the International 04 assert their right to negotiate the 'meaning and value in civil society', seeking to both conduct and control the dialogue. Consequently the International 04 becomes the arbiter of the cities ambitions, but the curators, mistakenly fail to question their right in taking this authority.

The language used by the curators of the international 04, owes much to the faux democracy found in the book *Relational Aesthetics*; Nicholas Bourriaud's much quoted and fashionable aesthetics of discourse and conviviality; a text associated with contemporary, discursive and socially engaged art practices. As Dave Beech points out, in *The Art of Encounter*, 'Bourriaud's use of the word dialogue is used as a synonym for democratic relations'³. Beech says, we have not to forget 'that dialogue is itself a carrier of antagonism and conflict. Dialogue cannot be assumed to be collective, reflective, decentered and cordial, when it is evident that most dialogues occur within hierarchical, stratified, split, antagonistic relations.' Beech then goes on to say that what is more important, is what, 'Slavoj Zizek argues in *The Ticklish Subject: the absent centre of political ontology*, [is] that dialogue functions as a brilliant technique of hegemonic power precisely because it conceals power in the process of extending it.'

Referring to the many 'interpretations' of Bourriaud's 'convivial encounter', the curator Ele Carpenter asks, 'Are we confusing the social with the sociable?'⁵ She is probably right, for if, as Bourriaud declares, his relational discourse is preoccupied with the aesthetic and the formal; it is therefore the aesthetic manifestation of social relations that Bourriaud advocates, not arts ability to affect social change. Understood like this, it becomes obvious that the convivial is an ineffectual framework to examine arts potential as a catalyst within the social and cultural relations of a city. In his recent polemic, for Art Monthly, entitled *The New Curation*⁶, Mark Hutchinson clarifies the problem, describing how the new curation makes, 'its claim to some kind of political (democratic) redistribution of power and [it's] interests amounts to no more than the aestheticisation of politics.' Rather than generating political engagement, the Independent 04 has simply painted a picture of it. While this could appear harmless, it is reflective of an on-going problem; convivial practices are, like a placebo, filling the space where a genuine discourse about art and the social is required.

At the International 04 the curators chose to use a 'convivial' framework rather than establish a platform for critical art practices. The International 04 is framed by the

contradictory views held by Lewis Biggs, and Declan McGonagle. In a joint statement, they say ‘Only those projects that can inhabit and negotiate the intersections between the global and the local, without disempowering the local or diminishing the art, will be able to speak convincingly about the new possibilities for the transaction between art and society’⁷. It appears that their aim is to bridge the gap between, an attempt to discuss art in terms of its relationship to the social, albeit in this case, without divisions, and the demands of the art market.

The contradictions, within this marriage of ideas, are evident when the collaborators describe their own particular visions; Biggs sees Liverpool as a player in the art market and a visitors centre for art lovers; McGonagle, claims that Liverpool can be a ‘laboratory’ where socially engaged practices are made actual within the social fabric of the city. In his essay *Owned and Possessed; Commissioning Biennial Art*, Biggs talks candidly about the market value of the commissioned works; accepting the difficulties of collecting the types of practice that constitute ‘biennial art’ but discussing their increasing assimilation as commodity. Biggs also points to the central aim of the biennial, ‘to continuously develop the already rich arts infrastructure of Liverpool - making the city a better place in which to practice as an artist or to visit as an art lover’⁸. Biggs is a curator producer, eager to establish the Liverpool Biennial as an important event in the run up to the Capital of Culture 2008. He wants successful ‘exhibition-making’, and therefore selects those works that will draw tourists from around the world.

Biggs’s vision is clearly different from McGonagle’s preoccupations. In his essay, for the International 04 catalogue entitled, *Terrible Beauty*, McGonagle focuses upon the ‘social’ as opposed to the market. His intervention is a call for a critical art practice through which to discuss Liverpool. He states art has always been political, quoting Thomas Hirschorn’s call ‘to make art politically’ he goes on to say that ‘making art politically is to make art and stimulate discourse’ and that this is most powerful when ‘in the world’ and at Liverpool this is ‘connected to the actualities of specific places’. He describes the potential of the biennial as a ‘process, which consciously empowers its self [in order] to intersect the social, the political, and the economic’. McGonagle is looking for models of

participation that might relate ‘directly to other models of participation in the larger social and political contexts.’⁹

Biggs and McGonagle is an odd couple; they have divergent positions, but choose to collaborate for the Liverpool Biennial. There is no evidence of them problematising this relationship; what is missing is an acknowledgement that when art meets the social, the discourse is complex and difficult. Instead Biggs and McGonagle appear satisfied that in their pragmatism, they have brokered a ‘third way’.

Rather than discussing the consequences of their combined position, Biggs and McGonagle prefer to discuss the methods by which they have managed the International 04. The method they employed was given particular significance and was described as a ‘collaborative approach’; their aim was to devise a method of commissioning that was more inclusive and shared, and therefore, in their view, more democratic. They support this claim of democracy by describing how the production of the artworks connects ‘with a great many people’.

The executive curators contracted four ‘researchers’ from overseas; this expanded curatorial group was to then propose artists whose practices would connect with the biennial site. It was anticipated that the researchers would bring new perspectives and art forms to the city. Within this management structure, some responsibility was transferred to the group of researchers, although the executive curators made the final selection of artists. Having made their proposals the researchers would then have no further contact with their proposed artists; the development of the projects would be handed on to teams based in Liverpool. The researchers proposals for artists they warranted being included would not be made public, they did however have an opportunity to contribute to the catalogue.

The method of devolving curatorial responsibility, prevented the researcher and the artist from continuing to work together, effectively ending a shared understanding or set of principles that had led to the artists selection. This is highlighted in the essay *Art and*

*Artists, Please Wait for a Commission*¹⁰, by the curator Sabine Brietwieser in which she discusses her role as a researcher. The management style of the International 04 led her to actively explore her 'curatorial responsibilities' as part of her work for the Liverpool Biennial. In the essay she expresses her reservations about the devolved curatorial method and appeals for an unequivocal role for curating with regard to the art and the artists involved. Brietwieser says 'this experimental process' was meant to contribute to a 'reconsideration of the relationship of power, and the roles of knowledge, information and realisation, production'. She is critical of her 'diffuse' curatorial responsibilities, saying, 'I believe that institutional and curatorial support and responsibility, the knowledge and experience of how to collaborate with the artist, and production conditions in general, are pivotal to the final artwork.' Brietwieser acknowledges that curation requires a conceptual framework and a set of principles through which to develop an exhibition. Formal contrivances and complex methodical devices created by some curators distract from the production or reading of art work. Similarly a diffused or devolved process of curating does not provide a platform for critical discourse.

International art biennials and events have played a part in the rise of the curator, the form of mega event has become a powerful platform for the new curators preoccupation with display, distribution and mediation. In this context curating has become the subject of activity rather than the art it promotes; the curators role shifting from one of collecting, arranging and selection to one of a producer of meaning. Mark Hutchinson says, 'the claims of contemporary curation seems to be couched in terms of technical competence, formal innovation and a critical (or political) effectiveness, backed up by the axiomatic belief that curation can provide a critical challenge to, or displacement of, the normative procedures for the production of meaning in art'¹¹. Further more, in seeing their practice as a critical challenge to conventions, some curators overlook the fact that artists working with site and context manage the activities of display, distribution, mediation and reception, as an integral aspect of the social engagement and social discourse within their projects.

Art biennials place art in the cityscape, but this action alone is not a symbol of a democratic culture, nor does this act as a catalyst for change within the social and cultural relations of a city. Only a clear and purposeful form of curating can set up the conditions in which the social potential of art can be discussed in this context. For this to occur, we need curators who are prepared to propose and examine a question or position and who are able to establish the structures that both critically and practically support art practices. If curators are not critical, biennials risk becoming a secondary level of art practice, caught between other agendas, failing to ask questions of art, and failing to consider the complexities of all of arts public(s).

Regardless of the democratic rhetoric used by the International 04, it appears that there was no real attempt to enable an open discourse about art and the social. Art and the institutions of art were never questioned or put at risk. Art itself was not examined through ideas of the social; the social was only a theme for art to engage with in order to enable artists to make more art.

Yet, despite all the many problems with biennials, there is hope for art here; they do have potential as a site for change, where arts audience, and arts relationship to its public(s) can be discussed. It is in the awkward context of the biennial where we can consider the social divisions that exist within the city and the cultural divisions that exist within art, because, it is here, where they are most evident.

Notes

1. Foreword. Lewis Biggs and Declan McGonagle. International 04 Catalogue, edited by Paul Domela, ISBN: 0-9536761-5-3
2. Guide 2004, Liverpool Biennial, International 04 pg 6.
3. *The Art of Encounter*, Dave Beech, Art Monthly issue 278
4. *The New Curation*, Mark Hutchinson, Art Monthly issue 277
5. Ele Carpenter. said this to us in a recent conversation
6. *The New Curation*, Mark Hutchinson, Art Monthly issue 277
7. Foreword. Lewis Biggs and Declan McGonagle. International 04 Catalogue, edited by Paul Domela, ISBN: 0- 9536761-5-3
8. *Owned and Possessed; Commissioning Biennial Art*, Lewis Biggs, International 04 Catalogue, edited by Paul Domela, ISBN: 0-9536761-5-3
9. *Terrible Beauty*, Declan McGonagle, International 04 Catalogue, edited by Paul Domela, ISBN: 0-9536761-5-3
10. *Art and Artists, Please Wait for a Commission*, Curator Sabine Brietwieser International 04 Catalogue, edited by Paul Domela, ISBN: 0-9536761-5-3
11. *The New Curation*, Mark Hutchinson, Art Monthly issue 277

We work collaboratively. Our practice is defined by its political and social engagement.

The content and context of our work is an exploration of what is described as 'public space'.

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