

## Two Birds one Stone - Liverpool Biennial 04

Steven Paige

9.56am. Church Street.

I can't help but have a sense of unease when about to view performance art in a public street. There is the possibility that things could become unravelled and you are seeking for the nearest exit. Fluid flying through the air, bodily or otherwise, or a high level of unexpected nudity is always a great leveller of an audience. If you have previous knowledge of the artists' activities you might at least have an idea of what to expect. Not so with the artist I am here to see from a city I am not familiar with. I decide to arrive before the performance starts to try and get a sense of what I am about to see. I notice others waiting. They seem the right crowd, art students and some individuals smartly dressed with black frame glasses. Being new to Liverpool, the layout of the city and its social currents are unknown. This adds to the unease and expectation of viewing a new work. You are placing your trust in the curators of the Biennial, and you wonder if it will be misplaced. This sense of unease can also be part of the excitement of seeing something new. The place of the 'institution', where you would expect to view the majority of artworks, has been swapped for a street in Liverpool. The performance appears unbound from any obvious reference and has the un-policed immediacy of the public space. For an outsider this skews your ability to take context from your surroundings without a little work. So to be dutiful to the viewing experience you would need to take on the city's context, its histories and personality. The other potential in the unfamiliar context, is that this conjunction will inform the work and feedback to the audience. At the very least it will appear as a spectacle or a form of entertainment for the passer by. What if you are a new arrival with unyielding timetable? How are you to read the art in relation to the city?

Five minutes pass and the performance has still not begun. If sited art takes its environs as a part of the construct, including the audience, we were on a slippery slope. At a time

like this you can't help but wonder at the process involved in curating a biennial. I start wondering what it must be like for the international artist. What a great activity. You fly from city to city, biennial to biennial, possibly engaging in a local history; population; landscape, or not. You get the support of an institution, some financial security and some sleepless nights. The work will rise out of the short-lived relationship, bound to its location by the fact of the commission. Then the show is dispersed. In this situation the artist becomes the commodity, not the work, bound as it is by its 'locality'. The artist is commissioned on their ability to act as a currency for their practice. The nature of the relationship becomes pertinent and is cited in the same terms as discussing the artwork. This certainly was the case with the Biennial. Four researchers each had the task of bringing in twelve artists to whom some affinity with the city could be garnered. Their role was to advise (not to contribute) to the process of the artist collaborating with the various venues. The relevant researcher and then curator would have had to put their reputation on the line. I wonder if researcher/curator lost any sleep over their selection. Did they have a motivational lunch session, a team talk? How did they feel about their involvement in the city? At what point did they (the artist/curator/researcher) feel that they had digested enough of Liverpool to feel satisfied that they could, as commissioned, use the city as a realistic context to produce work (if they did at all)?

The only one way to see the artworks on show is to travel around the city, seeking out venues. Yet the neighbourhoods go unnoticed as you travel directly as possible to your destination, using your map and trying to be as economic with your time as possible as there is a lot to see. I have a sense of dislocation from the city streets themselves as I search out each venue with the orange cube stuck to the exterior. I feel a sense of relief on spotting one, then a slight awkwardness when trying to work out exactly where I have travelled to in relation to my hotel. The act of engaging the Biennial seems at odds with engaging with the city. The whole activity feels goal orientated. A remedy would be to take time off to explore the city, but then you worry about missing something relevant from the art on show.

The city on the surface appears to be a willing participant, but that could just be a well presented unified development and marketing strategy, giving a polish to the surroundings. The hoardings and banners create a visual sense of citywide continuity. The map of the galleries and locations of the artworks decide the view of the city for the visitor of the Biennial. An imaginary fence hems the edges of the activities. I start to imagine how it could be approved upon. How could the line between the city and the artworks of the Biennial be blurred? Would the local areas want the art on show on their doorstep? How could the population of Liverpool decide on the management and spending of a creative enterprise in their own city? The local communities would have plenty to say about what they would like to see happen in their neighbourhoods, their city. I doubt the survey would appear very sexy to the developers. If asked to spend some of the budget of the Biennial on new housing, improved local spaces and amenities, or at least a percentage, what would be the outcome? New housing developments have this constraint. Why not citywide festivals that last three months? You could conduct a survey to discover what they wanted to see in their city. Maybe a survey could be done via text from a mobile phone.

The gathering of such a large collection of art in one city that is accessible to the public for a specific period of time would appear at to be a good thing. A building of pressure and momentum that has a temporal place in the calendar will generate excitement and energy. At least for the opening few weeks, and at the end when you get the last minute rush from those who have put off visiting the shows until the last possible moment. I say accessible but this does not take in the fact that you have to pay in to the Tate to see the majority of the International section of the Biennial. What happens when the event is over? What happens between the Biennials? If going by national statistics a fifth of a surveyed audience admit to visiting a gallery or exhibition, what of the rest of the population? Liverpool would have approximately 350,000 people not interested in visiting an exhibition, not a popular activity. Does the art then get to be the glamorous front for the cities redevelopment schemes? The link between the redevelopment of the city and the use of 'art' as a form of cultural currency is pertinent if not also questionable considering the facts. There is also the feeling that this is part of an antiquated

philanthropic parochial hegemony on behalf of the backers and organisers of the event. Can art solve citywide problems? How is this measured? Flipping this around, the energy and resources spent on the short term production of the Biennial could be put towards more long lasting activities that have a continuous impact and access to all the inhabitants of the city, not just specific strata of the population. Why not try to be more inclusive? The mechanisation of the Biennial, by its various methods of presentation, promotion and site creates a false pecking order of priority in the work on show. Why put the Independent section in run down areas of the city? Is the perception that dilapidated areas are cool, so the independents being new and 'young' suit the area, or are they being used like top coat of paint to promote the potential benefits of redeveloping an area withered by the decline in industry? Development issues aside, why did they not get a room at the Walker or a marquee in the city centre or an empty football field?

Finally a red jacket comes into view. The artist and her assistants proceed to set out their props: microphone; amplifier; stereo and headphones. The headphones are put on, plugged into the stereo, and then the artist, who I presume is in the red jacket, proceeds to listen to music that only she can hear and while using the amplifier sings into the microphone. This kind of activity is usually confined to the shower or car interior for good reason. The singing is not tuneful or particularly nice to listen to. What strikes me is the recognition of an act that one time or another, if not often, we all engage in. We all do this, but never know how bad it sounds. This is an private activity made public in the street. The musical reference to the city was obvious. Luckily she did not choose to use the Beatles music, otherwise it might have turned ugly, but then an lazy context would have been created. To be fair a few of us might secretly harbours the desire to sing in public, thinking that we would sound tuneful. This was a reminder that this is often not the case. I was embarrassed and unexpectedly impressed by the artist for being so brave. The glamour of the artist in bright red coat set itself against the wailing public noise she was making. After a short time, I got used to the singing and started looking around at the passers by for their reactions. The majority of them ignored what was taking place. The odd group teenagers laughed and mocked, but even they lost interest and moved on when they did not get a reaction. The performance and the performer felt a more honest

exercise than another red dressed singing piece located in the city. You could eyeball the artist, confront and comment on the absurdity/brilliance/arrogance of the piece. You could ask why? Who gave you permission?

The same could not be said for the red painted gloss house playing ABBA's greatest hits too loudly throughout its rooms located near the Albert Docks.

'Do you know where the red painted house is playing ABBA music really loudly?'

I ask this of a passer by as I nearer to the dock. The answer she gives is that she has never heard of it. This came as a surprise to me as I romantically imagined that the inhabitants might have at least a vague knowledge of the contents of the Biennial, specially the brightly painted on the green variety. A short time later, I head towards the Tate to seek directions to the house, before I make it to the information desk I spot it a short distance away on the green. I realise that in fact I was very close to the house when I was speaking to the passer-by. It was not relevant to her routine and she was probably not particularly interested in seeking it out. It was tucked safely away in the redeveloped dock area within site of the Tate. We were standing with a wall or two between the house and us. This seemed lazy and not very brave on the decision to site the building. Why not put the house near or in a thoroughfare in the city centre. Apart from having to afflict passer by, at least there would be passers by, not those journeying specifically to see it. It would be interesting to watch it potentially get slowly vandalised, acting as a target to late night revellers. An interesting fact about the house is that some of the visitors without the knowledge or permission of the invigilators was using the toilet, which is also painted with red gloss paint. The plumbing in the house was not connected, not part of the original design. This problem was left for the invigilators to mop up. The answer was to try and secure the toilet seat down to prevent further use. Form and function could have been combined into a useful structure. Maybe I am missing the point. A painted toilet in a painted bathroom can be described as art. But for some it might be still that, a painted toilet, skipping its transcendence to art object. Maybe the visitors using the toilet were giving a more honest critique of the house than any written piece could.

The next and last stop of the day was Derby Square, near the Royal Liver Buildings, with a large Victorian edifice to Queen and Empire in the centre. A not dissimilar crowd from the earlier performance seems to form again. A clock strikes the hour in the distance and like a starting pistol suddenly everyone instantly appears to be having a conversation with his or her neighbour. It is a bizarre coincidence. A person next to me turns and starts talking directly to me. I am asked 'do I like Liverpool, did I live locally? What do I think of the Biennial?' This was happening all throughout the group standing in the Square. What could be described as an 'intervention' is taking place. This act encompassed the whole crowd in an instant act of mass dialogue. This is the first time that I have been asked a direct question about Liverpool or the Biennial from someone directly involved in the event and living in the area. I ask my protagonist about how she is involved in the 'talk-in'. A few months ago an advert was placed in the local Press requesting people to work on a survey project, no experience required. The final applicants were chosen after a mass-auditioning event. They were not told about their involvement in the Biennial until the last possible moment. You cannot get more immediate than this. Realistically the artist could only set this up to run a few times as the immediacy would be lost if it was expected it, giving the project a fairly short life span. It is the first time that I have been made to feel implicated in the activities of the city. The event is not being mediated through a catalogue, map or press release. Any normal reserve was challenged face to face. It felt as though I had access to the Biennial and Liverpool, although fleeting and possibly tenuous, it felt somehow meaningful.

I felt a shift in viewpoint. I did not have to see the city or the art on show through a catalogue or glossy map. I could move around the city, walking unhindered and maybe even missing out what is on show. With no mediation and no plan I can see what is relevant to my own interest. I don't need a prescribed reference to contextualise the work that I view. I could view it simply in relation to the street, gallery or city I was in. Any critique of the Biennial in relation to Liverpool would need to engage in the construct of the event from the selection, curation, marketing and its relationship with the city redevelopment to be rigorous. This process is quite different from appraising the merits

of good and bad art. I am not interested in the 'event' anymore. By the nature of placement, a lot of the artworks are hidden from view, be it on the green at Albert Dock or a back gallery at the Walker, from visitors and inhabitants of Liverpool alike. I want to engage in the art itself, the participants of the city and the street plan. I stepped off the Biennial trail. I can walk down a street and not get worried about getting lost or missing a pertinent piece of work. I perceived an equal space, a level playing field opening up between the exhibitions and activities in the city. I stopped being interested in the Biennial and whether it was worthy or not. It was a relief. I dropped my small orange catalogue at the next convenient point and went for an unmediated walk through the city, hoping to find something interesting in the two hours I had before my train departed the city.

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*Steven Paige is an artist whose work often incorporates various media such as video, photography, sound, written text and found documentation and is engaged with social space. He is currently completing an M.A. Contemporary Visual Arts at Falmouth College of Arts, Cornwall, UK. Current projects include Max10 , and Experimental Film & Video screening program.*

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