

## Will the real Spartacus please stand up?

Gareth Woollam

*“Those who arrive at Thelka can see little of the city, beyond the plank fences, the sackcloth screens, the scaffolding, the metal armatures, the wooden catwalks hanging from ropes or supported by sawhorses, the ladders, the trestles. If you ask “Why is Thelka’s construction taking such a long time?” the inhabitants continue hoisting sacks, lowering leaded strings, moving long brushes up and down, as they answer, “So that deconstruction cannot begin.” And if asked whether they fear that, once the scaffoldings are removed, the city may begin to crumble and fall to pieces, they add hastily, in a whisper, “Not only the city.”*

*If, dissatisfied with the answers, someone puts his eye to the crack in a fence, he sees cranes pulling up other cranes, scaffoldings that embrace other scaffoldings, beams that prop up other beams. “What meaning does your construction have?” he asks. “What is the aim of a city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?”*

*Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities<sup>i</sup>*

Celebrations have begun in earnest here in Liverpool – Capital of Culture 2008. The appointment of ‘Australian cabaret legend’<sup>ii</sup> Robyn Archer as artistic director for 2008 will ensure our civic celebrations are of the highest standards. Having hedged our bets throughout the bidding process between being a truly great centre of culture and pleading that the city was the bidder in most need of a boost,<sup>iii</sup> we have firmly come down on the side of the former and have settled nicely into our routine. Life’s one long party, the circus, or at least our penchant for event based culture, is permanently in town, it’s in that Celtic blood of ours, the culture of the ceilidh<sup>iv</sup>. What’s more, the largest arts festival in the country, the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, having just administered the city’s biannual ‘adrenaline boost’<sup>v</sup>, has been heralded a ‘critical success’. The Biennial may have passed but we have next years Sea Liverpool 2005 (The city will celebrate themed years in the run up to 2008. This year has celebrated ‘Faith in One City’; “a wonderful year for Liverpool. Our communities have taken centre stage in a year of joy, diversity and variety”<sup>vi</sup>) to look forward to and for which the Liverpool Culture Company will seek ‘beautiful projects’ for the ‘promotion of social cohesion’<sup>vii</sup> to sit under the

umbrella of their ‘Around the City in 80 Days’ project. Our job here is done - culture as celebration, celebration as culture.

The notion of a ‘critical success’ is an interesting one in relation to Biennials in general and Liverpool’s in particular. The scale and complexity of the festival invariably leads to reviewers who, having got over the novelty of being in the city, attempt to make sense of the event as a whole, “Who, and what, are all these events for? Curators and Biennial directors search their souls about this”<sup>viii</sup> before adopting the ‘on the whole it’s mixed but here are a few of my highlights’ template. This year’s critical winner was Yang Fudong’s *Close to the Sea* closely followed by Jill Magid’s *Retrieval Room* and *Evidence Locker*, New Contemporary David Rowland’s *Bill Viola is Rubbish* (although this seems to have succeeded more for the resonance of its title than its artistic merit) and to a certain extent Navin Rawanchaikul whose art world microcosm, *Super[M]art: How to be a Successful Curator: A Survival Game* has proved a popular critical mechanism. Notable mention goes to Yoko Ono’s contribution *My Mummy was Beautiful* whose success or failure has been difficult to determine – a win-win situation for all involved. Congratulations to all.

Biennials are notoriously complex, difficult to both manage and make sense of. However, critical indifference may be symptomatic of a more fundamental problem. Assertions such as Adrian Searle’s, “social engagement doesn’t necessarily mean engaging art: it can mean boring art”<sup>ix</sup> should not be confused with the call for a return to the meritocratic, agenda free days, when good art made up Biennial selections. The problem is that the Biennial’s rationale does not extend far enough. Its agenda is itself indifferent.

Curatorial selection in the last two Liverpool Biennials has been devolved. The Biennial organisation for International 04 operates as facilitator as opposed to wielding any curatorial force and, as a result, everyone and no one bears responsibility. Four researchers were asked to select artists on the basis of their, “affinity for Liverpool’s culture.”<sup>x</sup> The selected artists were then commissioned to create new works in response to the context of Liverpool. This rationale seems to only succeed in creating a “general

atmosphere of unreflecting civic celebration”<sup>xi</sup>. The problem lies in the fact that the Liverpool Biennial adopts no position to counter. Its framework of ‘The City as Laboratory’, coupled with this search for ‘affinity’, creates a situation in which artists are effectively entering a process of experimentation knowing the desired results and will doctor them to suit as opposed to exposing themselves to a process of any rigour – there are no hypotheses to be tested. This is the comfort zone of pseudo-science, trading on the authenticity of the discipline whilst dispensing with the messy business of responsibility.

The commissioning process of International 04 saw forty new works created responding to context. Once the researchers had proposed their artists, their involvement in the creation of the work appears minimal. Where was the curatorial questioning of these artists during the process of production? How did the Biennial manage its relationship with the artists and did the ‘spirit of experimentation’ extend to these relationships?

The Biennial addresses the limitations of art’s capacity for social change by attempting to create a space to protect the artist, alleviating the discomfort of operating under any imposed social agenda. As Paul Domela reflects, “Given these imbricated positions and the increasingly fluid conditions that characterise our existence today, taking a stance or pursuing an ideal have become delicate undertakings.”<sup>xii</sup> Cuauhtemoc Medina suggests that, “by assuming a negative-critical role, city art tries to avoid its total assimilation as an instrument. But that ability to criticise largely depends on art practice being granted a certain level of irresponsibility.”<sup>xiii</sup> But this strategy can only work if the commissioner compensates for the artists position of irresponsibility. There is a difference between protecting an artist from being sub-servant to a social agenda and freeing them from any responsibility for the quality or ambition of a project. This is evident in Azra Akasamija’s ‘Bread and Games, Plant and Play’, in which both the commissioner and the artist are complicit in diminishing the social ambition of the project. The Biennial celebrate the fact that, “This project presents an opportunity for the local community which they can take or leave. It makes no promises and sets no expectations.”<sup>xiv</sup> The artist manages to negate through a belief in the principle of self-organisation, “The real impact of a project does not come from the intervention itself, but from how people use and misuse it, how

they resist it, adapt to it and ultimately transform themselves, the communities and their institutions. Allowing for ‘use and misuse’, ‘give and take’, ‘steal and mutate’ to happen, a project can provoke a much more complex set of relationships than a conventional ‘input-consume’ method of a master plan”<sup>xv</sup>.

The comfortable veil of self-organisation is not confined to the International, it also permeates the ambitions of the AFoundation’s official Independent section, “For the first time we are proud to say that the independent section of the biennial is self-determined, self-regulated and self-organised”<sup>xvi</sup> which, in their hands, are by-words for indeterminate, unregulated and disorganised.

The AFoundation have distanced themselves more and more from curatorial responsibility for the content of the Independent section of the Biennial, whilst co-opting more and more activity to reside under its umbrella. Its original remit was honourable but its current running is more of a hindrance than a help to Liverpool’s artistic community. Its vision of an ‘Independent District’ (its long-term plan for a cultural zone owned by the people for the people, as opposed to the acquisition of vacant property for a temporary exhibition) reads like a pop manifesto, some hastily prepared biography, than their desired strategy for sustaining culture. This area will serve as a retrospective reward to a previous generation for cultural services rendered during the ‘dark days’ and will be powered by the strength of its working-class authenticity. (Mr. Moores excepted.)<sup>xvii</sup>

At a pre-Capital of Culture event, Jayne Casey, chief executive of the AFoundation, observed that everyone in the city was petrified of rocking the boat and being the one who could cost us the title<sup>xviii</sup>. The difficulty we now face is that no one wants to jeopardise the ‘success’ of 2008. The recent abandoning of Will Alsop’s Fourth Grace project (a ‘flagship Capital of Culture scheme’) is symptomatic of this kind of thinking. Belief in a bold choice seems to have evaporated. The failure of the project has been attributed to a ‘lack of leadership’<sup>xix</sup>.

The Liverpool Biennial is a benign force. Its role as a facilitator to devolved curatorial responsibility seems to continue to resign it to artistic mediocrity. The flexibility of its organisation, rather than affording it the space to be truly radical with the model of a Biennial, provides a veil of experimentation with a remit of no promises, no expectations. Perhaps the Biennial, in an effort to be truly radical, could reinvest in the idea of a master plan, a blueprint, address those delicate undertakings and maybe even pursue an ideal.

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<sup>i</sup> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972) Vintage 1997 page 127

See also; Lewis Biggs, *Owned and Possessed : Commissioning Biennial Art* (2004) in *International 04 Catalogue* (2004) Liverpool Biennial of Cotemporary Art Ltd. page 29

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.robynarcher.com.au>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DDE1.htm>

<sup>iv</sup> See Lewis Biggs, *Owned and Possessed : Commissioning Biennial Art* (2004) in *International 04 Catalogue* (2004) Liverpool Biennial of Cotemporary Art Ltd. page 29-34

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.biennial.org.uk/news\\_release9.htm](http://www.biennial.org.uk/news_release9.htm)

<sup>vi</sup>

[http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/entertainment/previewsandreviews/tm\\_objectid=14978063%26method=full%26siteid=50061-name\\_page.html](http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/entertainment/previewsandreviews/tm_objectid=14978063%26method=full%26siteid=50061-name_page.html)

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.liverpool08.com>

Urban Cultural Programme 2005 Application Form Guidelines

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,1308939,00.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid

<sup>x</sup> [http://www.biennial.org.uk/news\\_release9.htm](http://www.biennial.org.uk/news_release9.htm)

<sup>xi</sup> [http://www.frieze.com/review\\_single.asp?r=2073](http://www.frieze.com/review_single.asp?r=2073)

<sup>xii</sup> Paul Domela, *The Bounce Factor : Recoding the International* (2004) in *International 04 Catalogue* (2004) Liverpool Biennial of Cotemporary Art Ltd. page 67

<sup>xiii</sup> Cuauhtemoc Medina, *The Lure of Dystopia (Notes on Global City Art)* (2004) in *International 04 Catalogue* (2004) Liverpool Biennial of Cotemporary Art Ltd. page 146

<sup>xiv</sup> Sharon Paulger, *Azra Aksamija : Bread and Games, Plant and Play* (2004) in *International 04 Catalogue* (2004) Liverpool Biennial of Cotemporary Art Ltd. page 16

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.shrinkingcities.com/237.0.html>

<sup>xvi</sup> Liverpool Biennial Guide 2004 page 28

<sup>xvii</sup> See: <http://www.afoundation.com/afoundation/indydistrict.html>

<sup>xviii</sup> See: 'Spliced' April 2003 at:

[www.superchannel.org/Home/Channels/SPIN/Common\\_Channel\\_\\_SPLICED.rm/player.html](http://www.superchannel.org/Home/Channels/SPIN/Common_Channel__SPLICED.rm/player.html)

<sup>xix</sup> Liverpool Daily Post December 8<sup>th</sup> 2004 page 1&5

*Gareth Woollam is an artist based in Liverpool and co-editor of Static Pamphlet. His practice explores social space, utopia and cartography and is principally disseminated through 'The College of the Six Days' Work'. He is one half of collaborative duo Darkhorse Projects with Elizabeth Kearney, who are primarily interested in pedagogic structures and the contribution that can be made to artists practice outside the institutional framework, (an interest initially explored through artists network Splice).*

