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Contemporary Art and Globalisation

Biennials and the Emergence of the De-Centred Artist

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Abstract: The impact of Globalisation on contemporary art practice has been both obvious and disconcerting, apparent and subtle. Most recently, the world wide growth in 'Biennials' has provided the most obvious evidence of the radical changes which have been taking place in the global economies of contemporary art practice since the collapse of the Eastern Block. Globalisation has, as in many other areas of social relations and endeavour, both homogenised and fragmented engagements with and responses to the 'art world'. This has led to a kind of new, postmodern 'International Style' of works which, despite their differing quality, simply appear to be the same in any kind of location. In response to the blandness of such 'airport art', many Biennials have recently sought to encourage a direct 'engagement' with the 'cultural specifics' of their location. The result of this has been, perhaps predictably, a kind of 'parachute documentary art' produced by artist willing to make lightening fast responses to the possibility of a financially rewarding brief. However, in spite of this polarisation of the contemporary art world, into the glibly general and the impossibly specific, many artists have begun to produce works which are intentionally 'de-centred' - dispersed over time, space and location – simultaneously denying the possibility of their works post-biennial absorption into a globalised economy of commodified art objects and further de-stabilising the traditional relationship between artist and artwork. Drawing on the experience of researching Channel 5's programme on the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art 04, this paper will attempt to evaluate some of the significant shifts that are taking place in, and as a result of, the growth in the contemporary globaised art economy.

Keywords: Globalisation, Contemporary Art, Art Biennials

THE LAST DECADE has seen a sharp rise in the number of international Art Biennials. Globalisation has ensured that more established venues, such as Venice and New York, have recently been joined by a raft of new Biennials from places as diverse as Sao Paulo, Kwangju, Sydney and Istanbul. The reasons for hosting a Biennial in any city can be varied. For example, As Arthur C Danto has pointed out 'No sooner had apartheid ended in South Africa than Johannesburg announced its first such show, inviting the governments of the world to sponsor exhibitions in acknowledgement of its moral acceptability.' (Danto, 1995 p.23)

More often than not, however, contemporary Biennials are a way of signalling that a city is willing to join in a globalising economy of commerce and culture by using art to encourage tourism, economic regeneration and international media profile. The city of Liverpool is no exception to the above rule. In 2004, the city's third Biennial of Contemporary Art opened its doors to a local, national and international audience of artists, art lovers, critics, journalists, reporters, and tourists. The publicity centre piece of the Biennial was Yoko Ono's city wide installation 'My Mummy Was Beautiful'. For this piece, Ono placed large scale banners and hangings around the city which carried photographic images of her breasts and pubis. Carrier bags and badges, carrying the same logos, were also made available around the city. In 'Tate Liverpool', members of the public were invited to write down memories and emotional recollections about their mothers and pin them onto a wall of the Gallery. The public nature of this project, along with the resonance that Yoko Ono has for the city of Liverpool, guaranteed this work a high level of international media coverage.

However, much of this criticism either missed, or wilfully avoided, the key issue which Globalisation is raising for contemporary art today – on one hand, the growth of a certain type of art which one now expects to see at Biennials everywhere whilst, on the other, a marked decrease in the 'specificity' of localised cultural production. Where this issue was addressed, it seemed that no real alternative was made available besides the suggestion of a return to more traditional forms of aesthetic evaluation which, in effect, ducked the issue completely.

For example, in his Guardian article 'Visual arts: Scouse stew', the respected art critic Adrian Searle pointed to what he saw as the endemic problem of international 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 pointed 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 argued, however, that such 'social engagement doesn't necessarily mean engaging art: It can mean boring art'. (Searle, A. 2004 p. 14)

Commenting on Yoko Ono's inclusion in the Biennial, Searle reasonably suggested that it may have been due to the fact that she was John Lennon's widow. His response to her work, however, was nothing to do with the adequacies or inadequacies of its possible social engagement with the location of its display. Instead, he dismissed it because it was 'slight'. 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.

One has to be careful of throwing the baby out with the bath water when bemoaning curatorial initiatives however inadequate they appear to be. 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 biennials are somehow pre-packaged and simply presented for public appraisal. Such familiar manoeuvres also allow critics the appearance of engaging with issues whilst, in fact, they are glossing over this responsibility with the distanced objectivity of the cultural anthropologist.

The result of such familiar and confused approaches to the issue of art and globalisation is, I would argue, simple enough. 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 the local, national and international production of culture. To do this is to forsake the possibility of actively engaging with the fragmentary and complex growth of contemporary culture and, instead, to wilfully accept its homogenised and sanitised alternative. The problem now is that it is often possible to unwittingly comply with the veracious blandness of globalisation at precisely the point when one is offering critique.

A clear example of this difficulty was offered in Liverpool Biennial by Navin Rawanchaikul's work 'SUPER(M)ART – How to be a Successful Curator: A Survival Game'. This installation allowed audience participants to compete in a monopoly type board game as rival international freelance curators. In order to compete, players had to book a game in advance and play, as part of the installation, in a gallery space at 'Tate Liverpool'. The eventual winners of earlier heats went on to face each other in a series of finals. The ultimate winner was awarded a large 'Oscar' type trophy which declared them to be the Liverpool Biennial 'Supercurator'.

In the catalogue accompanying the Biennial, Laura Britton, herself a curator of 'Public Programmes at Tate Liverpool', made this astutely open ended statement about the work 'SUPPER(M)ART':

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 t 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, Britton did not attempt to answer these questions. Instead, she merely pointed 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. (Britton, 2004. p. 184)

At first glance, it seems simply 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 the globalisation of culture do not really work like this. They are much more complicated and diffuse than their own appearance would lead us to believe. 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 presents itself as its own work of art. This, I would argue, is the key to why so many internation-

al 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 who's content, if it is to have any, will be timeless, limitless, transcendent, non-culturally specific and, in a paradoxically ironic twist, plainly 'international'.

So what of the 'Scouse Stew' of Liverpool Biennial 04 and its much vaunted 'International' strand. According to Searle, the decision to invite four researches to nominate artists who would visit Liverpool and make works based on their responses to the city fell short, leaving only 'attempts to be relevant'. Clearly, the exponential increase in Biennial's 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, I would argue, as a kind of 'airport art'. As the instantly recognisable hinterland of the international terminal becomes a beacon of stability in a shifting world of image, it is comforting to know that a growing number of artist are making a living by producing work that could seamlessly decorate such oases and still leave you wondering what country you're in. It is perhaps due to the very parochial nature of Liverpool's own 'John Lennon' airport that it, as well as the art it contained by Yoko Ono, trade on the name and misty memory of the ex Beatle.

But this 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 Liverpool's involvement in 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, whist others could not see beyond the blatantly obvious to the truly specific, it was still a diverse and controversial show. If parts of Liverpool 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. Lets 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 Biennials '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 and 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 bench mark standard by which the works could be seen to stand and 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-legitimisation 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 in this way that the well policed border 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' of globalisation 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 for 2008'), could undertake would be to offer itself as the best possible map to the production of a dynamic terrain of multicultural interaction. Of course to say this is to imagine that Liverpool is somehow a person with advanced cultural cartographic skills. In reality, the true job of all those cultural producers 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 - artists, critics, curators and publics should take it now.

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