

So you're an Artist-led Initiative?

Essay by Dany Louise, for a newspaper produced by artists' group Eight Days a Week.

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Within any local or regional arts ecology, artist-led initiatives tend to grow in the spaces between institutionalised opportunity and the commercial sector. They recognise the aim of being a professional artist - rather than being a professional manager - and even though artists often have to be both, this is perhaps the major difference between being artist-led and working curatorially within an institution. For emerging artists, these initiatives tend to respond to a perceived lack of opportunity to make work, exhibit and sell; while for more established practitioners, they often focus on critical explorations that fall between the concerns of art college, gallery institution and commercial outlets.

In Liverpool's case, the Tate, the Walker Gallery, the Biennial of Contemporary Art and FACT provide exposure to High Art. They make available a mainstream live art experience within a changing curatorial programme for artist and non-artist alike. But for Liverpool artists, they give only constrained opportunity to participate *as artists*, most usually as part of the educational programme or technical team. The Bluecoat Art Centre alone has worked with a more open curatorial policy, promoting artists - including those that are Liverpool based - that they believe have something serious to offer. View 2, a city centre commercial gallery, offers a reasonably professional selling outlet for those producing living room art, and there are a clutch of café outlets where the odd piece might sell: the Egg café (currently experiencing a new lease of life), Domino, the newly opened Almiro Gallery in Waterloo.

But most of what is going on for critically engaged Merseyside based artists is artist-led within the city, or takes place elsewhere in the country or abroad. Artist-led initiatives fall into two categories; that which is non-building based and conceptually driven, and those that have a bricks and mortar centre.

In terms of building based groups, the Bridewell and Arena studios in the town centre are the longest established, with Arena curating its own gallery space, while the newly opened The Royal Standard will be worth keeping an eye on. Otherwise, the longest running and most successful non-building based initiative is Eight Days a Week, now well established in its tenth year. But

there is little else of note. Even Static, the most intellectually driven space Liverpool has had, has become a once or twice a year event.

Artist-led initiatives have tended to come and go over the years. Remember Parking Space? The Three-month gallery? Giant Studios? Launched with a fanfare of good intentions and solid aims, the latest band of graduates set out to succeed where others had failed. A programme was launched, funding was gained, people got drunk at the openings. Then they fizzled out. What keeps happening? Again and again, it seems, artist-led initiatives on Merseyside have fallen on fairly stony cultural ground. The earth is ploughed, the seeds are sown, good quality topsoil is added, but little grows, takes root and thrives. Why is this? What is stopping an artist-led base thriving in Liverpool?

Many other cities will point to similar experiences, while looking enviously at Liverpool's arts infrastructure. But anyone who has been here for five, ten, fifteen years will be able to list the artists who have left for more fertile pastures. There has been a steady drift out of the city, by the young and talented, and by the older and more experienced. Liverpool has been identified as one of those bands of cities that has been steadily shrinking over 30 years and more, the legacy of economic breakdown in the seventies and eighties. In some senses it still struggles to recover, and one consequence is the difficulty of achieving critical mass in the arts.

It seems that the major issues arise from a mixture of rampant commercially driven regeneration and certain deficiencies in the public arts funding system; most notably the addiction to project based funding. Many artist groups, particularly those set-up by recent graduates, respond to the need for studio space once art college provision has been lost. But this has now become the hardest type of initiative to make work. In Liverpool pre 2008 Capital of Culture days, abandoned warehouses, factories and shops were plentiful and cheap. Since then, soaring city centre rents, coupled with the 2008 regeneration and building boom, has made this a realistic option only outside the city centre.

Buildings cost money. They take capital to buy and without capital artists have to rent. Landlords generally come in two varieties: commercial property developers who want to make money, or the occasional sympathetic property owner. In Liverpool these might be the A Foundation or the Bluecoat Arts Centre; but however sympathetic they want to be, at best they still want to protect their investment and at worst, they have their own need to balance the books. Whichever way, the artist group is in danger of losing financial control every time their lease comes up for renewal.

The higher rents become, the fewer artists can afford them, and of the artists that can, they are more likely to be doing commercially successful – as opposed to critically successful – work. Where 'critical quality' is a funding prerequisite, for example with the Arts Council, this becomes a slippery slope to be on. The Arts Council would like all building based groups to cover their revenue costs through rents, while they part-fund specific projects. They may, for a fixed term, pay some development costs and possibly a business/building manager. But if after this some form of stability and credibility has not been achieved, they will tend to view these groups as a bottomless money-eating pit.

On the other hand, being conceptually driven can work very well. Without a building, artists can afford to be project based. They can focus on the art, rather than the issues of running a building. They can be fleet of foot, responsive to changing needs, ideas and trends. They can plan ahead. And once a track record is established, funding flows more easily.

This is the welcome position of Eight Days a Week. Set up by established artists in Liverpool and Cologne, with the clear aim of creating reciprocal relationships and artistic dialogue between the two cities, it has built slowly and steadily. Key to this success has been its outward focus, remaining both international and regional with its activities. It has proved a useful platform, part of a rich network of relationships between artists and institutions, enabling critical peer evaluation, and opening up varied opportunities that would not otherwise have happened.

Liverpool's 2008 Capital of Culture title is bringing more people into the city to live and work, and is gaining positive attention from around the country. Certainly there is more money around and it is to be hoped that the 2008 buzz will provide a turbo-charged stimulus for the arts, as well as bringing greater stability. The challenge will be to sustain these benefits post 2008, the major issue once the Capital of Culture year is over. If achieved it will bring stability, an ability to make longer-term plans, and a sense that steady growth is both possible and desirable. But this is not necessarily the most advantageous state for all artist-led initiatives. It could be argued that there is much to be said for a quick blaze of glory before the inevitable crash and burn: risks can be taken, responses can be tailored for particular periods in time, lessons can be learned - and something else will take its place.

Artist-led initiatives can be on the edge, feeding the institutions both in terms of ideas and staff, keeping them fresh. The funders need to oil the wheels, working strategically to balance activity. And a healthy arts ecology needs each of these three elements, ideally operating within a symbiotic relationship. The greatest state of play is where they are feeding each other,

functioning in a collegial manner, and recognising the valuable contribution they each make to the city and region.