

## **Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art**

Various Venues, Sept 16th – Nov 26<sup>th</sup> 2006

Feature by Dany Louise

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Since landing the title of Capital of Culture 2008, Liverpool has become a turbo-charged regeneration hothouse. The “green shoots of recovery” optimistically heralded elsewhere in the country in the early nineties, have at last sprouted into giant triffids, crowding the Liverpool skyline in the form of hard-angled industrial building cranes. Liverpool’s renewal is unmistakably physical, with a vast amount of new building and numerous upmarket lifestyle shops and coffee bars opening in the city centre, along with designer shopping malls and swish new apartment blocks.

But in truth, Liverpool has been experiencing a revival for some years, and arts and cultural projects have always played a part. The opening of Tate Liverpool in 1988 at the newly rebuilt Albert Dock paved the way for the first Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in 1999. Since then the Biennial, as it is popularly known, has grown in size and reputation to become the biggest visual arts festival in the country and is an integral part of Capital of Culture planning.

For ten weeks every two years, the major players of the art world descend on Liverpool to see art shown in over forty locations across a city centre “footprint”. All the major galleries participate - look out for exhibits in Tate Liverpool, the Walker Art Gallery, FACT and the Open Eye Gallery – and there are also a significant number of works in unexpected public settings and independent spaces. September is a palpably exciting time to visit.

“The *International 2006* is our showpiece exhibition, the critical focus of the Biennial,” explains Director Lewis Biggs. “The intention is to recognise the specific cultural context in which it is shown: Liverpool is unique in its people, history and built environment, and yet it is also representative of many post-industrial cities. The exhibition will be sensitive to the context of the city - made and seen in Liverpool.”

Acknowledgement of Liverpool as a city in accelerated transition also means recognising awkward undercurrents. House prices have tripled since 2003 and the 65p cup of tea, along with the much

loved 'chips and egg', has gone for good – at least in the newly glossy city centre. It is this process of dynamic change that the *International 2006* is responding to.

"It's about engaging with the energy of the city and exploring it in different ways", says Sorcha Carey, International co-ordinator. "We've asked the artists to view the city as a vibrant and changing organism, and to engage with some of the key debates that are taking place. For example, (German artist) Hans Peter Kuhn has seen Liverpool as "a city full of questions". He is constructing a giant fluorescent question mark on the Wirral side of the Mersey, a literal and metaphorical symbol that everyone can have a personal response to."

FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology) is also presenting art which records this transitional phase. "Our works will include text, smell, film, video and computer animation", says Ceri Hand, Director of Exhibitions. "For example, artist Kelly Mark has pieced together a narrative of the city through its stories. She's made 26 films that are personal portraits but also cover an amazing range of experience - everything from art, history and philosophy to medicine, law and activism. We're showing them not only in our media lounge but also on the BBC Big Screen, as 26 episodes of a soap opera."

In previous Biennials it has been the public works that have really caught the imagination, and likely contenders in 2006 might be Priscilla Monge's football pitch, designed as an obstacle course for visitors, and as a metaphor for human communication. Or maybe it will be the piece by Portuguese artist Rigo. In what is a relatively simple concept, but likely to resonate powerfully on a sub-conscious level, he will be caging the stone lions in front of the neo-classical St Georges Hall, re-animating them as symbols of untamed danger.

Part of the Biennial's achievement has been to provide a strategic focus for two existing visual art events, incorporating them into the festival as equal parts of the whole. Thus the UK's most prestigious and long-running painting competition, the John Moores Exhibition, occurs during the festival. Itself a biennial event, hosted by the Walker Art Gallery since 1957, it offers a first prize of £25,000, judged this year by pop artist Sir Peter Blake, (he of Sergeant Pepper album cover fame), and Tracey Emin.

Counterbalancing this weighty John Moores tradition is the New Contemporaries survey show. Open to current and recently graduated art students across the country, it selects around thirty-five emerging artists to create an exhibition of "the very newest and best contemporary art."

The final piece of the Biennial picture is the Independent, an exuberant yet exasperating outpouring of creative vitality. The Independent is, if you like, the fringe; a myriad collection of exhibitions, interventions and happenings from Merseyside's population of resident artists, who would otherwise be disenfranchised from Biennial events. On the evidence of previous years, the work ranges from the very interesting to the sheer bloody awful. So far no-one has managed to pick it up by the scruff of the neck and sort it out, but at the least its ballsy 'have a go-ness' is to be admired, and it does present visitors with yet another narrative of the city.

2007 will see Liverpool's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, widely understood as a rehearsal for 2008. The Culture Company, the organisation delivering the Capital of Culture year, has revealed plans for "a birthday weekend" of street parties, "historical pageant and procession" and "Europe's largest fireworks display", promising to reveal the full programme imminently. But to date, apart from the Biennial, no-one is knows what to expect from either year, particularly given the recent resignation of The Culture Company's artistic director. Ironically then, the most potent symbol for the city's immediate future may be that giant illuminated question mark on the banks of the Mersey.