

What can Culture Buy Us? By Dany Louise

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During a panel discussion at the Art 05 event held in Liverpool, conversation inevitably turned to Liverpool's designation of Capital of Culture 2008. Chairing the discussion, Alan Yentob wanted to know, "Who's running the show? Are there any representatives of Capital of Culture here?"

A few seconds of embarrassing silence was heard. No-one was willing to admit to running the show, or stand-up and be counted for the policies they were implementing - despite a fairly senior representative of The Culture Company, the organisation charged with delivering Liverpool 2008, giggling in the row behind me.

It was left to Peter Mearns, North West Development Agency (NWDA) Director of Marketing, to fill the vacuum. "The Capital of Culture year", he said, "is the fuel that will drive the rocket that will lead the regeneration of Merseyside. We are interested in jobs and people's quality of life. ***It's not about the art or culture at all.***"

Another deafening silence engulfed the auditorium, but of course – for reasons discussed by JJ Charlesworth in Art Monthly 243 – no-one was prepared to argue with this statement. Panellist Eddie Berg, ex Director of FACT, could only thank Mearns for his "frank position statement" and sum up with the deeply cynical: "here in Liverpool, it is about what culture can buy us".

So why is this significant? So far, it is so very New Labour: art as an instrument of and vehicle for social change, with well-funded quangos using their financial leverage to effect Government policy. But while commentators on Merseyside have long suspected that the various agencies, including The Culture Company, have little genuine interest in the arts and the city's arts institutions, it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first time it has been admitted as policy in a public forum. It's a policy fully endorsed by Cllr Mike Storey, Leader of Liverpool City Council, who recently said: "Being Capital of Culture is about many things, but fundamentally it is about creating jobs and creating confidence." (Daily Post 20.9.05).

There isn't a soul on Merseyside who doesn't want 2008 to be a tremendous success, but it is a cause of tension in the arts community that the agenda for the year is so overtly concerned with regeneration. While this is expected of the NWDA – since the Regional Development Agencies were set-up with an explicit responsibility for the economic development of the regions – it is more surprising that The Culture Company positions itself so firmly in the regeneration camp. After all, the bid was won at least partly on the strength of the city's cultural institutions.

Or perhaps it isn't surprising at all. Constructed to be firmly under City Council control, with the Chief Executive of the Council as Director, senior council officers understand the concepts and deliverables of regeneration in the same way that key players in the arts know their own profession. In keeping with the New Labour zeitgeist, and with a passing familiarity with the sector, they think they can pull it off. But is it hiring the right people to do this? The Liverpool 08 website shows that The Culture Company consists of 59 people. By my calculations, a mere eight are in arts jobs. Arguably the most important job of all, that of Artistic Director, will not be filled on a full-time basis until 2006.

Economic investment and access to cultural activity should enhance and possibly raise the quality of life of Liverpoolians. No-one would argue that these are not critically important obligations. However, at present, arts organisations are expected to harness themselves to this aim, with minimal two-way dialogue about the nature of how they, the arts, and the creation of new work can best succeed. The wealth of experience within the arts institutions is not being tapped; questions go unanswered. For example, Lewis Biggs, Director of the Liverpool Biennial, points out that "the Capital of Culture business plan shows large quantities of cash going to secure the arts infrastructure, but no explanation of how much of this is new money as opposed to taking on all the responsibilities of the former City Council arts funding". Project-based funding is tied to "themed years", last year around "faith", in 2005, "the sea". Projects must adhere to these themes to receive funding. Naturally, every artist, arts and/or community organisation is complying. How can they not?

But it is instructive to compare the Cork Capital of Culture 2005 website with the Liverpool 08 one. Cork talks with integrity and intelligence about its artistic aims, explaining the thinking behind its programming:

"Cork seizes the opportunities offered by the designation European Capital of Culture 2005 in a spirit of engagement with contested ideas. Through our year-wide action in such cultural areas as political discourse, dance, literature, music, theatre, migration and community, we cheerfully join in the debate about what Europe is, and what Europe might become.... We engage in argument as well as art: we thrive on politics as well as music."

Contested ideas? Political discourse? If only the Culture Company would engage at these levels, the city would find it stimulating, pleasurable, satisfying – and you never know, an exciting creative narrative might emerge from the process. For their part, the fragmented Merseyside arts community could organise itself into an organic unit for the purposes of speaking and negotiating on big issues with an authoritative voice.

I believe the Liverpool situation reflects the national climate. We are witnessing the institutionalisation of art at regional and national levels under New Labour. It is sanctioned, safe and comfortable. Art's function to question received notions, to transgress, to provide a locus for dissent, to elucidate uncomfortable truths, to hold power to account, is being eroded. Whose works would an ultra-conservative government burn? What books? It's an age-old political truism that you tame your enemies by giving them a seat at the table. You confer status, influence and financial reward, then sit back and watch them first enjoy, and then defend the status quo.

The bureaucratic collapse of sector boundaries is bringing with it a collapse in understanding of key concepts: so "art" becomes "culture" becomes "museums and libraries" becomes an insignificant part of the "creative industries" which in turn includes media and ends with sport. Lo and behold, the creation of the DCMS. Art has always been commodified, but this state monopoly progressively diminishes art's authentic and independent voice, leaving it in danger of becoming meaningless on its own terms. Paradoxically, we find ourselves in the position where there is more funding available than ever before, but large sections of the visual arts may still be marginalised.