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## NEWS FROM NOWHERE

### Liverpool Biennial

Liverpool, England

September 18–November 28, 2010

Chin-Tao Wu argues that the art world's "biennialization" over the past two decades does not match the "decolonizing and democratic" claims of biennial directors. Instead, this institutionalized mechanism for the organization of large-scale international art exhibitions is characterized by culturally rootless globe-trotting curators and migrating artists in search of commissions and funding. Biennials contribute to a new orthodoxy that—despite the rhetoric of globalization, hybridization, and world markets—still serves the traditional power structures of the contemporary Western art world.<sup>1</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup> Liverpool Biennial represented the work of over sixty artists, with about half commissioned to make new work. Those who attempted to avoid the dangers, as described by Wu, of "jetting in and out of likely locations" with little time to assimilate local artistic production or cultural identities could rely on familiarity with the two-fold convention of display that characterizes many biennials. On the one hand, there are the established or radicalized "white cube" art institutions—reminiscent of global franchises—and, on the other hand, the seemingly ad hoc conventions of temporary or reclaimed sites often described as the "public realm" of shifting identities and hybrid communities. Liverpool followed this biennial norm with five established art galleries—the A Foundation, the Bluecoat, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT), Open Eye Gallery, and Tate Liverpool—as well as several venues in derelict or disused buildings.

The Biennial Visitor Centre, the largest exhibition space, was formerly the Rapid Hardware store; stretching for most of Renshaw Street, the building is owned by the same property conglomerate that opened the massive retail development known as "Liverpool ONE" in 2008. The latter envelops the Bluecoat and provides seamless pedestrian routes to the Albert Dock, which houses Tate Liverpool and the International Slavery Museum—a reminder of the city's lucrative participation in the infamous slave trade. The adjacent Mann Island, currently a leisure, retail, and commercial redevelopment site, was the

location for one of the Biennial's "public realm" installations by Héctor Zamora. Liverpool exemplifies the familiar cycle of real estate profit, urban displacement, and cultural spectacle designed to entice "consumers" and to legitimate an increasingly global phenomenon.

The Biennial theme, "Touched," was a catch-all label for contemporary art described as a "globalized activity" that can "communicate directly" to viewers with a "width of cross-cultural appeal."<sup>2</sup> The organizers' texts were beset with contradictory claims about identities, communities, and theories since the 1970s. The lack of cohesion and focus of this sprawling Biennial was therefore unsurprising. Visitors had to find their own meaningful focus.

Some cohesion was produced by the exhibition organizers' and artists' sensitivity to location. Next to the arched ceremonial entrance to Liverpool's Chinatown (the oldest in Europe), the derelict Scandinavian Hotel—evocative of colonial architecture—abuts a large abandoned industrial warehouse named Europleasure International Ltd. Outside the hotel, Will Kwan's *Flame Test* (2010) consisted of thirty-six raised national flags, all seemingly in flames. Each flag was printed with selections from flag-burning events taken from the archives of global press agencies, evoking tensions between emblems of national or colonial power and acts of dissent or transgression, not least in pursuit of human rights. Inside the old hotel, Alfredo Jaar's three-channel video installation "We Wish to Inform You That We Didn't Know" (2010) conveyed a dialogue on memorials, witnessing as representation, and state propaganda. The work relates to Jaar's "Rwanda Project 1994–2000" and "Lament of the Images" (2002), furthering his concern with the ethical dilemmas involved in looking at and displaying photographs of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. For Jaar, the problem of photographic documentation becoming complicit with media spectacle in image-saturated cultures leads to ignorance of the deep-seated causes of the 1994 genocide, which are inseparable from legacies of colonialism and the slave trade. Jaar's title refers to the claims made by many Western leaders that they were unaware of the full horrors of the ninety-day slaughter. Jaar includes a thrice-repeated excerpt from President Clinton's 1998 speech in Rwanda in which he disavows knowledge of the depth and speed of the unfolding terror. Survivors tell their stories, and former Canadian Ambassador to the UN Stephen Lewis, a member of the Organization of African Unity panel that investigated the genocide and produced the 2000 Rwanda Report, insists that

Clinton definitely knew, but “his mind was elsewhere.” Jaar ends with Papa Wemba’s mournful song *Awa Y’okeyi (If You Go Away)*, memento mori images, and the text of the installation’s title stretched across the triptych of equally sized screens, one for each channel, to convey the hypocrisy of disavowal.

A short corridor away, in another cold, derelict space, a fairground version of The Beatles’ *Revolution* provided the soundtrack for Christina Lucas’s video projection *Touch and Go* (2010). Lucas recruited men and women, retired from Liverpool’s “past” industries, to “express themselves and the revolutionary within” by throwing stones at the windows of the former Europleasure building. In the film, designed to comment on the city’s industrial decline and turbulent reputation, the joyful participants appear to break the words “Touch and Go” into the glass panes. The film is screened in the very same building, surrounded by broken glass and the debris of abandonment, with the words still visible.

The less coherent Renshaw Street exhibition had connections to themes in the Scandinavian Hotel/Europleasure site. Under the “Re:Thinking Trade” section, artists comprising the collective Free appeared wearing sloganized attire to “re-colonize” the advertising spaces of the building’s shop windows as a critique of capitalist commodification. In a suite of windows, Minerva Cuevas extended her *Del Monte* project based, since 2003, on critiques of Latin American politics and connections between multinationals, the CIA, and modern versions of the slave trade. A display of graphic prints and racist objects, resulting from Cuevas’s research in Liverpool’s International Slavery Museum, signaled the historical relationship between commodities and colonialism. These accompanied stacks of canned tomatoes with labels evoking a well-known global brand and text describing their contents as “Pure Murder” and “CIA.” The reference was to the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup in Guatemala that ousted a democratically elected government committed to nationalizing the United Fruit Company and its lands, now owned by the Del Monte Corporation. Inside the building’s chaotic displays, Jaar’s “The Marx Lounge” was a haven for critical thought and dialogue, with sofas and a large table covered in books indebted to Marxist analysis. The project, which included an ongoing series of conversations between Jaar and leading intellectuals, was a collaboration with News from Nowhere, Liverpool’s radical community bookshop and workers’ co-operative.

Nearby, the Open Eye Gallery devoted its exhibition space to three Lars Laumann video installations on the politics of representation, that use irony and humor to reveal processes of censorship and duplicity. In “Duet” (2010), a large flat-screen television leaned against the wall on its end, playing a small-screen video loop combining Donald Rumsfeld and Margaret Thatcher in a digitized duet of state-sponsored certainty. Rumsfeld’s notorious statement that “there are known knowns” at a 2002 Department of Defense news briefing represents the



ideological rhetoric of the Bush administration’s “War on Terror.” Margaret Thatcher’s “I know it was right to sink her,” from a well-known 1985 television interview by journalist David Frost, refers to the British sinking of the Argentinean cruiser General Belgrano (which cost 321 lives) during the 1982 Falklands War. Amid claims of a government cover-up, it was later revealed that the cruiser was sunk in an exclusion zone while sailing away from the Falklands.

Like the Jaar installation, Laumann’s works are concerned with political disavowal and propaganda, but employ humor rather than pathos. In *Morrissey Foretelling the Death of Diana* (2006), Laumann mobilizes a range of popular culture images and a narrative of seemingly plausible but fundamentally absurd causal links, to argue that Morrissey’s lyrics for The Smiths’s 1986 album *The Queen is Dead* foretold the death of Princess Diana in 1997. Obvious parallels, with more devastating results, are Rumsfeld’s “there are known knowns . . . there are also unknown unknowns”<sup>3</sup> and media-saturated defense of intelligence claims for the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Overall, this Biennial suffered from an adherence to the culturally rootless “biennialization” of international art exhibitions. However, Jaar’s “The Marx Lounge” with books from Liverpool’s remarkable News from Nowhere provided possibilities for finding a focus that critically combined the local and the global. There was, therefore, the potential for discovering cohesive cultural critique in artworks by Kwan, Jaar, Lucas, the Free collective, Cuevas, and Laumann.

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NOTES 1. Chin-Tao Wu, “Biennials: Without Borders,” *New Left Review* 57 (May/June 2009): 107–115. 2. Lewis Biggs, *Biennial Artistic Director*, in *Liverpool Biennial: International Festival of Contemporary Art 2010 Guide* (Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art Ltd.), 8. 3. For the full text see [www.dod.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636](http://www.dod.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636).

**Above**  
*The Marx Lounge* (2010) by Alfredo Jaar; photo by Alex Wolkowicz