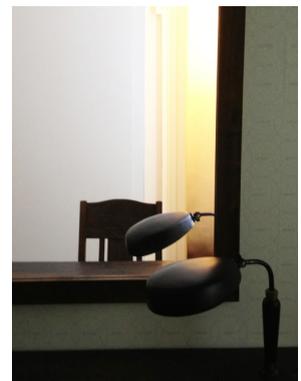
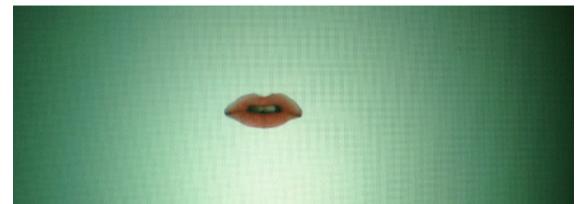


Ming Wong, still from *Making Chinatown*, 2012Kohei Yoshiyuki, *Untitled*, 1971Marcus Kahre, *No Title*, 2012Ahmed Ogut, *Let it be known to all the persons here gathered*Nadia Kaabe-Linke, *No*, 2012

Notions of Hospitality

ANNE MULLEE REPORTS ON THE SEVENTH LIVERPOOL BIENNIAL, WHICH TAKES PLACE ACROSS THE CITY FROM 15 SEPTEMBER – 25 NOVEMBER 2012.

THE Liverpool Biennial, now in its seventh edition, is the largest international contemporary art festival in the UK. It has matured into a place for continual exploration, anchored by the central exhibition. The week that the biennial opened coincided with the long-awaited publishing of an independent report on the Hillsborough disaster, the 1989 tragedy where 96 football supporters were crushed to death at Sheffield's Hillsborough Stadium during the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest. The title of the central exhibition in this biennial is 'The Unexpected Guest', which seems poignant now that this most welcoming of cities has finally been given a sense of vindication over the disaster.

'The Unexpected Guest' was devised by the previous festival director, Lewis Biggs (the current Artist Director is Sally Tallant), and curated by Lorenzo Fusi. It explores notions of hospitality from every possible perspective: as guest, visitor or audience (accidental or otherwise). This central exploration is bolstered by the biennial's diverse slate of projects, events and exhibitions including the biennial John Moores Painting Prize, the Bloomberg 'New Contemporaries' exhibition, the debut Sky Arts Ignition project, site-specific installations and peripheral projects in dozens of locations across the city. It is a vast, somewhat unwieldy offering, drawing on ideas of hospitality, entertaining, visitations, boundaries, journeys and arrivals. Over 60 artists are represented and the exhibition includes, with work including specially-commissioned projects, existing pieces and rarely-seen works.

The biennial also facilitates the development and support of long-term projects like 2Up2Down, a community development initiative facilitated by Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk. Here, a trio of properties in Anfield were transformed into the site for a 'cooperative reimagining' of living spaces and sites of work. The area has long been earmarked for regeneration, and has been cleared of inhabitants, but lost its funding in the cuts last year. Van Heeswijk's cohort of community workers are now designing a new template for living and plan to reopen a defunct bakery as a social enterprise. This project reflects Liverpool's current condition, a city partly regenerated by the retail commerce at its centre and still in possession of monuments to its past as an economic power. This provides scope for the over-arching leitmotif of hospitality and locations associated with the city's affluent past have been used to host the work of contributing artists.

The Cunard Building, an elegant emblem of early twentieth-century transatlantic ocean travel, is one such site. 'A Selection of Recent Works' by Mona Hatoum occupies corners and alcoves of the building's former first-class departure lounge. *Afghan* (red and black) (2008), an Afghan rug with a world map cut into it and *Shift* (2012), a carpet depicting a disrupted global map overlaid with a sound waves pictogram, imply a reimagining of borders and of how we map the world. Hatoum's commentary, though not made specifically for this exhibition,

focuses on frameworks as sources of identity and cultural belonging: a strangely reassuring gesture.

Turkish artist Ahmet Ödüt's biennial commission, *Let it be known to all persons here gathered* (2012), takes the form of a performance where an actor dressed as a modern-day postman rides on horseback from Liverpool to Manchester, announcing the imminent biennial to residents through a public address, imitating a town crier or a royal messenger. The video documentation of the messenger's journey delves into the sometimes strange and lonely nature of journeying and connecting, and touches on the discombobulating nature of archaic etiquette.

The Cunard also holds Nadia Kaabi-Linke's *No* (2012), again a biennial commission, that comprises two video screens portraying an interview in the form of a sung mass. On one screen a disembodied mouth sings questions derived from entry visa applications to a congregation of possible 'immigrants'. They respond to queries about their terrorist connections or criminal pasts with a melodious "Noooooo". Kaabi-Linke recasts perplexing and ridiculous attempts to extract 'official' information in a simple way using the benign and ritualistic setting of a church. This makes for witty comment on the conditions and limitations of a hospitality that is conferred through legal means.

This aspect of being a 'guest' is the focus of Ghanaian filmmaker John Akomfrah's ambitious new commission, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), which debuted at the Bluecoat. The filmmaker forges an elegiac celebration of the life and thinking of Jamaican-born academic, Stuart Hall, playing archive material from Hall's life alongside material of culturally and historically significant events that occurred during his lifetime. Shown simultaneously over three large video screens, the narrative is elliptical and disruptive, reflecting Hall's descriptions of his feelings as an outsider within his own family and as a migrant to the UK. "Identity is an endless ever-unfinished conversation," Hall tells us. It's a beautiful and compelling piece, where Akomfrah's accomplished documentary filmmaking experience dominates in what is an unapologetic love-letter to Hall's influence as a friend and a thinker.

The Bluecoat is also the setting for the 'TV Studio' where Dora Garcia and collaborators Toxteth TV filmed their interactive talk show *Outside!* (2012), a project that began at the time of my visit. It was billed as an opportunity for Liverpool residents to tell their own stories about the city while exploring the "porous nature of the relationship between audience and entertainer". The results are now displayed as an installation in the gallery. Though I cannot report on the finished work, I did overhear researchers briefing interviewees to ask about reactions to the Hillsborough Report, assuring them that "everyone has an opinion".

Not all the highlights were new or specially commissioned works. The Open Eye Gallery houses the first UK solo show of the late Mark Morrisroe (1959 – 1989), the US artist and art school contemporary of Nan Goldin, whose short but prolific career produced a legacy of over 2,000 photographs. Morrisroe continued making work even while hospitalised with HIV-related illnesses, building a makeshift darkroom in his hospital room to make some of the photo collages featured in the exhibition. Morrisroe's work is highly experimental and he uses parts of his own x-rays and ripped-up porn magazines to make his provocative images. These works, nearly all made in the few months before he died, marked a change in tempo from the immediacy of the punk aesthetic that he is most closely associated with and pose questions about where his work would have taken him.

Downstairs, a pitch-black room contains a series of photographs by Kohei Yoshiyuki, taken in Tokyo parks at night during the 1970s. I was given a small torch as I entered the gallery to shine on a succession of images. The photographs show pairs of lovers, both heterosexual and homosexual, entwined in intimate embraces while being covertly – or quite blatantly – observed by groups of male voyeurs. The photographs, from a series entitled 'The Park', have only been shown once before outside Japan since they were first unveiled in 1979. Predictably causing a stir, they have a sort of sexless repulsiveness that still has the power to disturb. Finding them by torchlight, I felt complicit in these acts of voyeurism. "I just went there to become a friend of the voyeurs... My intention was to capture what happened in the parks, so I was not a real 'voyeur' like them," Yoshiyuki states. Though he continues, "But I think, in a way, the act of taking photographs itself is voyeuristic somehow. So I may be a voyeur, because I am a photographer".

Liverpool's compact geography means that many of the site-specific works and smaller shows are easily accessible, salting the greater array on offer. But even so, this outline barely scratches the surface. Hidden down a side street is the latest installment in Singaporean artist Ming Wong's *Making Chinatown* (2012) project, a mixed multimedia exploration of identity as homage to Roman Polanski's iconic film *Chinatown* (1974). Wong plays all of the principle roles with steely intensity and appropriate camp, chasing his prey (himself) through Chinatown in various western cities including Liverpool.

At pub / gallery, The Munro, Finnish artist Markus Kahre pulls off a brilliant optical illusion involving two empty rooms and mirrors with no reflection (I won't give it away), reminiscent of the 'mystery houses' that entertained the hungry masses during the US depression of the 1930s.

There are layers upon layers to explore at Liverpool Biennial and this is just a snapshot. The overall event feels embedded in and wedded to the city, a metropolis that, for now at least, fizzes with ideas and welcomes. No invitation required.

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