

Liverpool Biennial 2010

TOUCHED



From here, the material in *Exposed* only got darker as rooms dedicated to voyeurism and desire and witnessing violence complicated the viewing experience. The tenuousness of looking at these images under the guise of 'art' became slippery, particularly in the face of Susan Meiselas's photographs of 1970s strippers and Nicaraguan victims of genocide. Koshei Yoshiyuki's 1979 series of nocturnal voyeurs preying on young couples in Japanese parks at night were also particularly confronting. And not in a 'goodness this is interesting' sort of way.

This idea of looking – and of discerning the voyeur from the witness – remains far from resolved and our moral qualifications of historical import (think Abraham Zapruder's film of JFK's assassination, now oddly held in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) versus pop cultural curiosity was only complicated by the realisation that the Pulitzer Prize-winning image of the young Vietnamese girl burned by napalm in 1972 was taken by the same Nick Ut who photographed Paris Hilton 35 years later.

With the exception of Sophie Calle's fabulously creepy 1981 work *The Hotel*, where the artist worked as a chamber maid in Venice and systematically documented the comings, goings and belongings of the hotel guests, the exhibition faltered towards the end, as the focus turned specifically to ideas of surveillance. Perhaps it was simply that after 13 rooms and hundreds of works focus was difficult to maintain, or perhaps it was that after 13 rooms of confronting, voyeuristic images, these large scale works – aerial images of personless landscapes and buildings et al – simply felt alternatively dry or oblique. It was an unfortunate end to what was otherwise an overwhelmingly strong exhibition and having thus been implicated, under the guise of art, in a mass act of complicit voyeurism, the lasting sense of *Exposed* was that as individuals and members of our contemporary image-saturated society, we have a responsibility to look critically, ethically and sensitively – and perhaps also to learn when to look away. ■

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EXPOSED :
*Voyeurism, Surveillance
 and the Camera* was on at
 the Tate Modern
 28 May - 3 October 2010

TOP: Ron Galella *What Makes Jackie Run? Central Park, New York City, October 4 1971*, gelatin silver print, 18.73 x 25.08 cm. SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund purchase. Courtesy the artist. **MIDDLE:** Walker Evans *Subway Passenger, New York* 1941, gelatin silver print, 12.07 x 14.61 cm. Collection SFMOMA, fractional and promised gift of Carla Emil and Rich Silverstein. Courtesy Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. **BOTTOM:** Shizuka Yokomizo *Stranger No. 2* 1999, chromogenic print, 79.4 x 79.4 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase.



Laura Belem *Venice of Brazil* 2007, wood, water, polystyrene, metal support, portable fans, 4 x 3 x 1.65m.

Esteemed international curator Charles Esche, who started his curatorial career in Liverpool as he told the assembled throng at the opening of the 2010 *Biennial*, gave a history of recent such events from an interesting point of view: that they had started in Europe, in Venice, then gained a head of steam in Asia – and he mentioned Gwangju and Yokohama – then ricocheted off Asia and back into Europe, with Liverpool being one resulting manifestation. Esche talks very convincingly of context, and in his speech emphasised the importance of the global and the local, and of the centrality of site to art. Everyone listening in St George's Hall (the example of 1850s British Empire mercantile magnificence) thought immediately of Liverpool.

Liverpool to outsiders remains an unlikely site for the only *Biennial* in the UK, despite the Tate Liverpool being the most visited contemporary art museum outside London, despite the importance of the Walker Art Gallery (a 'national' museum), despite the 2008 Capital of Culture extravaganza, and

now despite the new Australia Council studio: it struggles to surface from its recent image of decrepitude after two centuries of being "the second city of the Empire" and art and commerce looming large in that glorious past. So it isn't the great City of London, nor cute England, but its port and trade contributed centrally to what made England important. It's a site of uncommon and dynamic interest. So how did this site work for art in 2010?

Despite Australia (*pace* Sydney Biennale, APT et al) not being included in Esche's list or in this current show (bar the Aquilizans, who are called Filipino but noted as living in Oz in the catalogue), Lewis Biggs, Artistic Director of this, the sixth, Biennial and associated with them all, says how Tony Bond, Senior Curator at AGNSW, as curator for the first *Biennial* in 1999, was "invited to reflect on his own journey from England to Sydney as an epitome of the relation between Liverpool as a port city and the rest of the globe".

The benchmarks for me of the importance of site are Esche's (with Vasif Kortun) 2005 *Istanbul Biennale* and Fram



Antti Laitinen *Atlas, Forest composition 2009*, installation view, 15 trees, Barks, metal net, cable ties. Courtesy Nettie Horn gallery.

Kitagawa's *Echigo-Tsumari Triennial*, where in both cases artists of excellence (very young and seemingly untried for the most part in Istanbul, and a mix of young and extremely well-established – from Kusama to Cai Guo Qiang to James Turrell in Japan) really told us about that place and its relation to wider horizons.

There are moments in Liverpool this year where this does happen, but not with a sustained build-up of understanding and wonder. Why not? Perhaps it is the structure here with five main spaces used by different curators responding to a very flexible concept “touched”. Each curator has their point of view which instead of adding to the nuances of the theme, takes it in very disparate and dissipating directions.

The two most successful manifestations to me were Lorenzo Fusi's curatorial grouping in three stories of a 1950s disused hardware shop on the edge of the central city and at A Foundation (that's its name). The sprawling, scrappy hardware shop, like Cockatoo Island, takes some overcoming, with the visitor discovering the works almost *wedged* into its hollow spaces, though the human-size of the shop is more relaxed than the rocky landscape of Sydney Harbour, until one part in particular reaches out and grabs you round the neck. In a section well-called *the Human Stain*, there is a suite of paintings (notably by Austrian Markus Schinwald, Hungarian Csaba Kis Roka and Albanian Edi Hila) often quite small, that snarl, as the Biennale logo wolf does throughout the city, with scenes of such shocking bestiality that they make the videos of US trans-gender exhibitionist (never a better word) Ryan Trecartin seem mild, though they too certainly take one's attention. The video by Kis Roka is a sequence of his thick impasto paintings – a man pushed under a train (with resultant blood and guts flying), sores festering on a bald head which, attacked by flies, swells and blows off, a composer making a man in his groin vomit/ejaculate notes

over his musical score, a child beating a man to bloody death in bed, a man in a taxi crashing – you get the gist. They are funny in their shockingness, and together make the more serious offerings on ‘trade’ seem rather dull and obvious.

The other manifestation, at the other end of town, at A Foundation, has just two artists, Japanese Sachiko Abe, doing a too-beautiful piece cutting paper into a waterfall of white slivers, too much like origami for me though the catalogue (unconvincingly methinks) says it is not about beauty, but sited in nice juxtaposition with a truly engaging young artist, Finn Antti Laitinen. Showing video, stills, an installation with trees and a new bark boat being made to cross the Mersey, there is room to enter his realm of flat, grey and uninterrupted inland sea and matching skies, sliced by a sharp horizon line and a lone man imposing himself on its flexible but intractable power. He builds his own island that the sea relentlessly covers; he rows across the horizon towing his island, palm tree and shrub intact, to an unknown and unreachable destination; he digs for rocks for days, and uncovers what he uncovered in the first minutes; he becomes a subsistence man, squatting by an old fire, looking for fish, putting brush in a shelter, which sounds active but the video takes on the passivity of such a reduced life. The catalogue talks of him “erasing the boundary between success and failure”. Indeed.

Apart from the five main spaces, there are site-specific works, many being new commissions which is a great part of this gig, and also many ‘fringe’ events. The site-specific works, unsurprisingly, often used the city very well (Brazilian Laura Belém's ethereal bells in the beautiful old oratory of the cathedral, Belgian Kris Martin's huge sword dangling over a neo-classical stone entrance hall, Korean Do Ho Suh's house jammed in between old warehouses), but they too did not seem to build a wider understanding.



Ryan Trecartin *K-CorealNC.K from Trill-ogy Comp 2009*. Courtesy Liverpool Biennial 2010. Photo: Alex Wolkowicz.

I was told there were 870 artists showing in 400 exhibitions over the 10 weeks of the event. In between the central gig and the fringe is a middle group of shows called *City States*: a mix indeed of self-funded mini-shows from Jerusalem, a ‘Nordic pavilion’, a group from the Caribbean, a Quebec group, and a group of East Asian video called *Media Landscape Zone East*. An intended group from Taipei was cancelled, apparently because the funding didn't come through. The Jerusalem group was thoughtful, but the most disappointing – because it should have been so much better – was the East Asian video. A lot of the work was terrific but it was the worst display I have seen in years: a dark basement (forget reading the 12 pt labels), and a suite of tiny screens with headphones, no seats. At the end of a long day of biennale walking, this is death.

Being someone who counts where people are from, I was surprised to see that of the 60 plus artists of the main show only one group (of three) were from the UK. When I asked if this was an issue – imagine in Australia – I was told it was an ‘international’ show and the locals hadn't complained. I leave this comment to sink in... No-one from Liverpool... imagine... Often the only allusion to where an artist was from – their own site specificity – was where their representative gallery was located. The Tate Liverpool was worst in this: no information for the audience at all, except in the bought guide. For the very enigmatic works on view and complex curatorial rationale, that is just rude. ■

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Touched: Liverpool Biennial, UK, was on 18 September - 28 November 2010.

Laura Belém *The Temple of a Thousand Bells 2010*, installation with sound, glass bells, nylon string, 5.1 sound system, lighting. Music composed by Fernando Rocha. Photo: Alex Wolkowicz. Courtesy of artist.

