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## Boundary Tension: On the 2016 Liverpool Biennial

(<http://the-exhibitionist.com/boundary-tension-on-the-2016-liverpool-biennial/>)

July 26, 2016 | Mike Cooter (<http://the-exhibitionist.com/author/mike-cooter/>)



Koki Tanaka, Provisional Studies: Action #6, 1985 School Students' Strike, June 5, 2016, Liverpool Biennial. Photo: Courtesy the artist.

The 2016 edition of the Liverpool Biennial opened in July 2016—and while the exhibition was not conceived as a response to the UK’s June referendum on leaving the European Union, it is hard not to consider it in that light of the multiple political crises that currently engulf this increasingly inward-facing island. ‘Brexit’ has posed a remarkable challenge to the artists, curators, organizers, and sponsors of such events, and has drawn key concerns into focus.

The biennial was organized by an eleven-strong curatorial “faculty” that signaled an internationalist commitment. Alongside director Sally Tallant were Dominic Willsdon, Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malašauskas, Joasia Krysa, Rosie Cooper, Polly Brannan, Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Ying Tan, Sandeep Parmar, and Steven Cairns. This faculty divided the biennial into six interwoven themes, or “episodes,” spread across twenty sites: “Ancient Greece,” “Chinatown,” “Children,” “Monuments from the Future,” “Flashback,” and “Software,” an assortment that might strike viewers attempting to orient themselves as exactly the sort of polyphony decried by certain Brexiteers, and missing from public debate. The works, too, tend to overflow and drift—most literally with Jason Dodge’s work *What the Living Do* (2016), which deposited in each of the exhibition spaces the detritus of transport and leisure gathered up during international travels.

This gesture of reiterating projects across multiple sites risks exhausting the viewer or diminishing the works’ effect, and some projects certainly suffer from the lack of separation. But their repetition results equally in an intriguing stress test for both works and environments. One result of this strategy is that questions of boundaries and their permeability pervade the biennial. The compelling opening section of *Pharmakon* (2016), a new film commission by Lucy Beech screening at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), concerns an idiosyncratic conflict management workshop for venue security. In it, trainees are encouraged to identify “the surface, the non-surface, and the place in-between” through a process of experimental tactility. This screening is paired with a condensed retrospective of Krzysztof Wodiczko’s technical interfaces for interacting with the modern world, echoing Beech’s focus on decoding transmissions that cross boundaries: how they are addressed to individuals and internalized by them.

The exhibition at Tate Liverpool expands on this subject. There, the focus is on migrations both temporal and geographic, evoked through a particular approach to materials, in which alteration and erasure “speak” as clearly as what is present. Artist Koenraad Dedobbeleer provides display devices for antique sculptures from the Ince Blundell collection, foregrounding their scars and modifications: figures are collaged together, hermaphrodites re-gendered, a water god’s fountain mouth closed. These crude adaptations, discovered deep in history, recode our relationship to the stable past they (seem to) embody.

Céline Condorelli’s *Portals* (2016), materially diverse constructs that introduce the viewer to each of the “episodes,” equally make visible these mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. They offer vantages from which to view the other works, and focus attention on the contested nature of points of transition—one of these, for instance, is dedicated to the thousands of Chinese sailors who, having settled in Liverpool and establishing the oldest ‘Chinatown’ in the Europe (demarcated across town by its own monumental arch) were forcibly repatriated from the UK in 1945; past myopia calls up that of the present.

Mark Leckey's 'found-footage' montage *Dream English Kid, 1964–1999 AD* (2015), presented at Blade Factory, evokes a controlled data mining or constructed archaeology of Leckey's years on the planet. The lens through which this process is facilitated—here, initially at least, by collecting videos available online—is repeatedly brought to the fore. Leckey's excavation of the gaps in resolution finds a surprising resonance in another of the other carefully staged film installations in the Biennial, Lawrence Abu Hamdan's film *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016) at the oratory of the city's Anglican Cathedral. The work presents a verbatim transcript of gunshot analysis recorded during Israeli military actions against protestors in Palestine. The coincidence of social memory and material evidence—the crowd immediately registered the difference between live and “non-live” fire, while spectral analysis was required to persuade a reluctant judiciary of the same—is a reminder that truth is a matter not only of one's vantage point, but also of the conditions under which one looks.

The blurriness posed within its works of art is reproduced in the biennial's institutional boundaries, to more mixed effect. Projects installed around the Granby Street regeneration project—an urban renovation undertaking previously addressed by Assemble, a team of young architects and designers whose ongoing community project there won the 2015 Turner Prize—come across on the whole as surprising missteps. By responding to the challenge of monumentality works reproduce some of its worst attributes: curiously dissociated sculptures imposed on an environment that functions as backdrop rather than a social context, relying on spectacular scale and trite formal relationships to stand in for engagement with this scarred environment.

By contrast, Mariana Castillo Deball's *To-day 9th of July 2016* (2016) is a curious structure—part alcove, part tiered seating—produced for the Liverpool ONE shopping center. Composed of materials redolent of High Street interior design, it nevertheless encourages a non-monetized congregation incongruous with such privatized shopping environments, while referencing disruptive histories: William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890, also the name taken by Liverpool's radical bookstore), for example, and schematics for packing slaves into the ships that sailed between Liverpool, Africa, and the Americas.

More direct confrontation was introduced through Koki Tanaka's multi-part investigation of the School Students' Strike in Liverpool. Sparked in 1985 by the Conservative imposition of compulsory low-paid work-experience (known as the Youth Training Scheme ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth\\_Training\\_Scheme](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Youth_Training_Scheme))), the protest successfully invigorated political activism in a portion of the UK's youth in that moment. Dave Sinclair's photographs of the protest march were included in several venues, and Tanaka investigated the photographer's archive at Open Eye Gallery. Under the title *Provisional Studies*, Tanaka organized various workshops and actions. His restaging of the students' march with a number of the original participants was a worthy if familiar gesture, but his framing of oral histories from the original protest in dialogue with participants' children was more pointed. By emphasizing the hopes a politically active parent might have for their offspring, Tanaka's work foregrounds transmission across generations over simple commemoration.



Realized with a cast of Liverpool children and teens, Marvin Gaye Chetwynd's film *Doggy Ma Bone* (2016) takes up a similar theme, a fact emphasized by the nearby installation of one of Sinclair's photos. Chetwynd's *Threepenny Opera*-inspired *lehrstück* exploits Bertolt Brecht's performative didacticism, deconstructing narrative performance and contemporary capitalism. The children's compelling empowerment is encapsulated by a sequence in which a familiarly-baroque public performance is used purely as misdirection by the members of the child cast, who consort, like Brecht's army of beggars, unseen on its periphery—a reminder, if one were needed, of the necessity of broadening, not narrowing, one's point of view. How one conceives of matters of inside, outside, and in-between, the play makes clear, will define the opportunities of coming generations. They, after all, are the ones with the most to lose.

This, of course, brings us back to the inevitable context the EU referendum imposes. While many in the creative community are rightly concerned with what leaving the EU will mean for the UK, and how it reflects political developments nationally and internationally, the tendency toward the comforts of nostalgia should be recognized as incommensurate with the malleability of history. A genuine discussion would need to acknowledge not only the pitfalls of populism and nationalism, but also how far the EU project has drifted from its ideals—a drift for which the UK bears considerable responsibility. The task at hand, then, involves framing a positive argument for freedom of movement—people and ideas are co-travelers, of course—as well as for international commonality. In positing a community that embraces idiosyncrasy and interdisciplinarity in the pursuit of the communication of ideas, institutions such as the Liverpool Biennial have an important role to play in the conversation.

*Mike Cooter is an artist and writer based in London.*



Dave Sinclair, Youth Training Scheme Protest, Liverpool, April 25, 1985

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