TRACE The inaugural Biennale of Liverpool UK 1999

Exploring site as a context for difference.

In 1999 I was invited to curate the first Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary International Art. I was excited by the opportunity because Liverpool is a relatively small city but densely packed with history and richly endowed architecturally.

The foundation of Liverpool's wealth in the nineteenth century was based on the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Manufactured goods were sent from Liverpool to Africa and traded for slaves who were shipped to The Americas where in turn they were traded for sugar, tobacco, rum and cotton for the mills in Manchester. Each leg of this triangle would render the Liverpool ship owners substantial profits.

The history of the port was also implicated in the export of orphans and children of *unsuitable parents* a trade that continued up to the 1950s. So in addition to tracing the city I also wanted to trace the resulting Diasporas. I invited a significant number of Artists from Latin America and several African American artists.

The people of Liverpool are also very special. This seafaring community characteristically displays tough intellectual independence and fierce solidarity - they would be profoundly sceptical of the Biennial but if they could be won over they would defend it to the death.

This gritty environment seemed ideal for an exhibition that would extend beyond the museum. The old city can be traversed in a comfortable 20-

minute walk and provided many potential sites. I chose the theme
TRACE because of my continuing research into artists who employ
objects and materials as triggers for memory in contemporary practice.
To help anchor the exhibition in the community and take advantage of the
physical space of the city I selected artists who would also be interested
in tracing its history. The current renaissance in public art and the
engagement of artists in specific sites and communities made this an ideal
opportunity. Most of the artists came to Liverpool twice, for an initial
research trip to negotiate sites and later to install their work. Nearly all of
them came for the installation and typically spent two weeks in
Liverpool.

I used TRACE rather than traces because it allows an ambiguity between
noun and verb. In other words it would trace a path or search for clues
and present material evidence. The evidence of materials and objects has
a strong affective component. Implicit or bodily memory is triggered in
the individual through sensory responses to objects and places. This
exhibition would therefore privilege Affect however its objectivity was to
be secured by its specificity to site and history.

There were 60 artists in the exhibition showing at a dozen locations and a
number of billboard projects, but I will just show a few examples to
demonstrate how the theme worked in practice in particular in relation to
sites.

Salcedo at Liverpool Anglican Cathedral

Doris Salcedo 14 sculptures from the series Untitled 1991-92

The Cathedral was a demanding site because of its monstrous scale and its spiritual purpose. In my judgement Doris was one of the few artists capable of holding the space and making a work that was also an appropriate memorial for the building. Although the 14 individual sculptures already existed their selection for this installation was based on her prior study of the space. Their placement took 4 days to refine making the installation exquisitely site specific.

Doris Salcedo traces the distortion of reality that occurs when power and violence are used as means of social control. What comfort resides in the bed you once shared with a missing lover? What pleasure can one take in the intimate possessions of one's spouse or child when they have been dragged away with no explanation? Objects retain traces of those who have used them. It is difficult to throw away such traces of an absent loved one, and yet it is equally difficult to continue using them as though nothing had happened.

Here at the Cathedral wardrobes and beds are rendered monstrous by their merger. All the holes, gaps and cracks in the wood have been meticulously sealed with white cement. It is as if they have been rendered blind and mute, just like those whose silence is ensured by the threat of further violence. This careful sealing of the cracks is also read as an attempt to keep something out or in. But in this case the 'something' is elusive, like the nebulous fear of some unforeseen tragedy. Salcedo's fusion of inanimate matter and human remains provokes a sense of abomination.

Juan Munoz at The Old Oratory Liverpool 1992

Juan Munoz at the old Oratory, *Broken noses carrying a bottle* 1999

Juan Munoz specifically designed these new works for the old Oratory.   I gave him images of the space with the existing objects in it and asked him if he would like to work around them and the architecture.   He indicated that this kind of challenge was the only circumstance in which he would agree to participate in a group show.   Even so I did not expect new work, we originally discussed ways to adapt existing projects to the space so it was a great privilege to have his commitment to this extent.

The tragi-comic acrobats are even patinated to match the formal Victorian bronzes.

Bluecoat Art centre formerly the children's orphanage

Julie Gough   Home sweet home (forget me not) 1999

Julie Gough came to Liverpool to research local histories. Her work was
displayed at Bluecoat Art Centre that had been an orphanage in the
eighteenth century connected to the continuing deportation of children
from Britain to work in the colonies through to the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. The children were employed making pins and
sewing. At the cathedral cemetery she discovered a whole wall of
memorials to children who had died at the orphanage. The palettes in this
installation replicate the children's beds and the mattresses carry the text
frottaged from their memorials and then rendered in pins.
This work has been retained in Liverpool.

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, The seven powers came by the sea

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons *Unfolding desires* 1997

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pon's Yoruba grandfather was transported from Nigeria to Cuba to work on the Vega sugar plantation where her family still lives and works. With an oral tradition that kept their connection to Africa very much alive, the artist's friends and family were a living testament to a history of displacement.

The Seven Powers are based on templates for the stowing of slaves on the transport ships that once sailed from West Africa to the Caribbean after trading manufactured goods brought from Liverpool. The layout of the bodies on the slave boards is a powerful image of the conjunction of mathematical efficiency and brutality.

Unfolding desires refers to the labour of her people at the same time as it suggests a fleet of slave ships at sea.

Rosslynd Piggott, *La somnambule* 1996-97

Roslyn took an interesting space that was a kind of anteroom with two entrances and a window as well as an alcove. Her installation worked formally for the space while evoking ghostly figures from the past of the centre and in the window space she mounted two glass vessels one blown in Melbourne one in Liverpool and engraved with the text to that effect.

Rosslynd Piggott, Arranged meeting: breath of two men 1999

Nicola Costantino, *Human furrier* 1999

Nicola Costantino made her installation in a prominent Liverpool shop window. The window display includes an array of stylish garments presented on mannequins. Seen from a distance, the costumes could be made from suede, with a fur trim and a subtle pattern of flowers or some other simple motif. The garments are sufficiently intriguing to attract closer inspection but, as one approaches, the whole ensemble is radically transformed. The suede turns out to be latex and now seems more like human skin than leather. Worse still, the motifs that relieve the surface turn out to be directly moulded from the human body. Far from being florets they are revealed as direct body casts of navels, nipples and arseholes.

Nicola Costantino, *Human furrier* 1999

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Tate Liverpool in the development of the old warehouses at the docks

Reinhard Mücha, *Stockholmer Raum* 1998-99

Mücha's work often concerns (and is literally gathered from) sites of passage or transit. For *TRACE* he has relocated the installation *Eller Bahnhof* to the Tate Gallery. Originally constructed in Düsseldorf, the work was subsequently installed in Stockholm Moderna Museet, where it was set into the newly built walls of the renovated museum. Mücha was so surprised by the hasty carpentry of the walls that he decided to work

with this exposed structure in subsequent manifestations. He did this by cutting around the segments of wall, removing them from the gallery, and then displaying them in glass cases on the wall of the new space: first at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York, and now (in their fourth manifestation) in Liverpool. In this way, each successive installation contains physical traces

Reinhard Mücha, *Stockholmer Raum* 1998-99 installed in recreation of Luring-Augustine Gallery NY

Ernesto Neto, Densidade e Buracos de Minhoca 1999

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Alasdair MacLennan, *Unseeing trace* 1999

Alasdair MacLennan installed trestle tables running the entire length of his space and set them for absent guests at a wake. Their uneaten feast includes pigs' heads, fish and other items symbolic in the Irish Catholic tradition. The table is strewn with ticker tape listing the names of those

who have died in the conflict in Northern Ireland. MacLennan's performance took place, on alternate days, and consisted of his sitting next to the table dressed in black holding a branch and reciting the names of the dead. The length of the list was intellectually disturbing but the powerful sensation of mortality conveyed by the smell of the pigs heads made the experience literally gut wrenching.

Works that engage community participation as a way of anchoring the art in the site

Allan SekulaFreeway to China (Version Two: for Liverpool) 1998-99

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Allan Sekula continued his conversations with dockworkers that started in Los Angeles and included Australian and European ports. In Liverpool he documented the lives of workers who lost their jobs when the port collapsed including some poignant images of workers gazing through wire at the machines they used to operate.

One of the most interesting by-products of his involvement was a conference with a group of ex-Dockers who have set up an Internet

system to monitor the operations of shipping companies. Seamen on vessels around the world email them with details of improper working conditions and unseaworthiness and this information is immediately sent to the authorities at the next port of call where the ship is impounded.

Anne Noël *Give and Take* 1999

Ann Noël set up a stall in the shopping centre and engaged passers by in conversation. She asked them to give her some object from their bag or pocket that held some significance for them. For example you may find that you have kept a bus ticket for years without consciously acknowledging the reason. Its significance may be recalled as a result of Noël's invitation often unleashing a flood of memories. Noël would then sew these fragments into her quilt of memories while writing down your story in her book. The book was indexed to the quilt. These quilted local stories have been retained in Liverpool.

Anne Noël *Give and Take* 1999

Stephen Willats *Democratic Journey* 1999

Steven Willats devised a collaborative activity for 32 local people. They
were invited to spend a day working on his project. He showed them
photographs of details from a walk round Liverpool.   Then each person
was given a small square of paper with a black margin.   In this they were

asked to describe a journey in images words or maps or a combination of all three.

After a period of time he blew a whistle and made them stop. They discussed the images then Steve formed them into pairs selected at random the 16 couples now repeated the process collaboratively. After the allocated time he stopped them again and formed them into 8 groups of 4. Now there was a bit more discussion but consensus was reached. When it became 4 groups of 8 it was harder still to get agreement but they worked hard at it and succeeded.

Two groups of 16 were very difficult! Much argument was taken to arrive at strategies all 16 could work with. The two groups had adopted opposite positions one was very organised each had a given task to perform within an overall structure, they were dominated by control freaks. The other group opted for a "go for it" anarchy. Both worked up to a point but were very different.

The final step of forming one group was now doomed to disaster the control freaks and the anarchists became very cross with eachother some stormed out some became abusive. It took a great deal of negotiation to get the survivors to cooperate.

Basically Steven had demonstrated the structural limits of consensual society.

Erwin Wurm, *One minute sculptures* 1999 (instructions and toolkit for public performances)
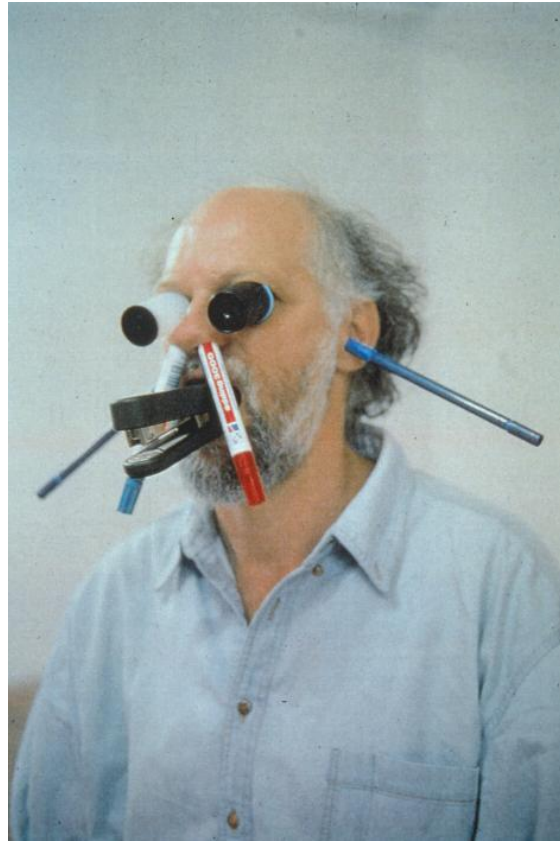
Erwin Wurm's performance sculptures arise from simple daily actions: trying on new clothing, driving by a billboard, or opening a box. At the Exchange Flags in Liverpool, Wurm displayed drawings as instructions for one-minute performances. Each performance entailed everyday objects being used to complete an action, based solely on the criterion that the action was possible.

The audience was encouraged to participate by following the instructions rigorously.
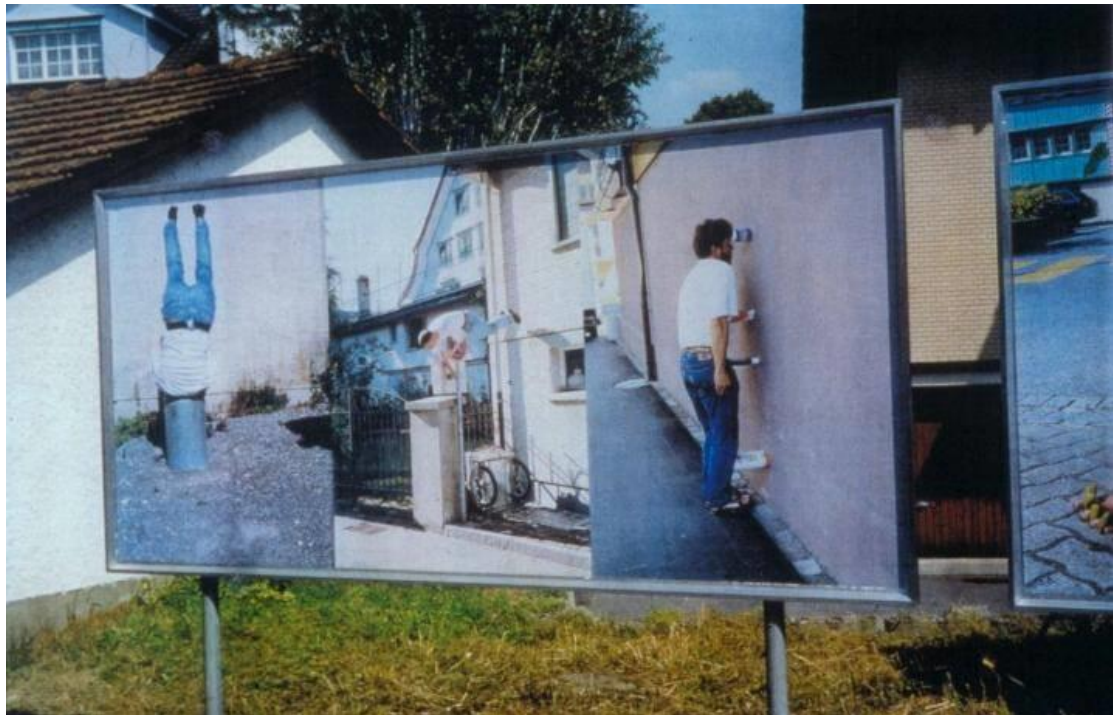
Erwin Wurm, *One minute sculptures* 1999 (Billboard from previous performance)

A billboard was created in Liverpool displaying examples of these performances.