Editorial: You Are Running Into Danger

James Harper

This 11th issue of Stages, Turning The Tide, adopts the recently unveiled artwork Merseyside Totemy by Alicja Biala as a focal point. The three totemic sculptures have been given a prominent location on Liverpool's waterfront, adjacent to the iconic Liver Buildings.

Merseyside Totemy brings together statistics around climate change aiming to visualize the issues Merseyside faces in terms of rising sea levels and flooding by situating them using local examples. Biala collaborated with Dr Jason Kirby and Dr Timothy Lane at Liverpool John Moores University and with designer Ola Sobczyk of Bjarke Ingels Group to visualize the data within the final artwork.

Kirby and Lane's research was integral to the development of Merseyside Totemy. Here they summarise their role in the project and contextualise the rate of change in sea level.

Previously Ola Sobczyk has researched the history and structure of Jewish communities integrated into Polish towns before the Second World War—known as Shtetls. She wrote an essay about how this symbiosis between Polish and Jewish communities led to the construction of wooden synagogues in the 16th and 17th centuries. With her research and design, Sobczyk wishes to create a spatial interference that reflects a cross-cultural dialogue. Her search for this dialogue led her to Canvey Island—its sea wall specifically.

Michael Truscello first contributed to Stages Issue #0, 'The Banff Report', in 2013. His essay 'Elevation and Cultural Theory' drew on the Capitalist stranglehold on our climate and its effects in the midst of the development of Liverpool's Deepwater Container Terminal at Seaforth. The terminal, Liverpool2, has since opened and undergone further expansion. Truscello was invited to revisit and respond to that text for Issue #11, and his essay 'What We Loved Was Not Enough' continues to highlight how our blind Capitalist agendas are overtly destroying our world.

Liverpool Biennial is aware of its role and responsibility in tackling climate change, making commitments towards environmental sustainability. There are many ways that this can be done through our day-to-day operations. Not only can we address how we transport art and artists around the world, we can also take responsibility through the type of work we display. Vid Simoniti's essay 'The Paradox of Ecological Art' ruminates on the impact that visual art can have on changing the perception of society and how long that change might take.

Meanwhile, Dr Christian Baars addresses the more practical concerns of how sea level rise and other changes in our climate will affect museums and collections, from damage caused by flooding to unemployment owing to closed galleries. The gallery and museum sector surely must react with more urgency to adapt to these changes.

Each of Alicja Biala's 4.5m totems features three ribbon flags pointing to three areas of Merseyside threatened by rising sea levels: Liverpool City Centre, Formby and Birkenhead. The flags reference international maritime signals. The title of this Editorial piece, 'You Are Running Into Danger', is one such signal given by the flags. The contributions to this issue of Stages serve to emphasize, if you were not already aware, that we are critically running into 'danger'. Action is being taken to ensure we can maintain a habitable world within which culture and heritage will remain and continue to inspire. This offers us hope for a positive future, but for this hope to become reality we must call on everybody associated with the sector, from audiences to workers, to act with us.



Alicja Biala, Process (Foundry) (July 2022). © Rob Battersby



Alicja Biala, Totemy – Liverpool (July 2022). © Rob Battersby

James Harper

James Harper is a Welsh artist and creative producer, based in Liverpool. Alongside his role at Liverpool Biennial, he is Founding Director of Periclo CIC, a studio group and project space in Wrexham.
James has been part of Liverpool's cultural scene since 2010 having held a studio and acted as Artistic Director at The Royal Standard within the city. As an independent practitioner, he has worked with organisations such as A-N, Bluecoat, Clwyd Theatr Cymru, Site Gallery and Tate Liverpool. He has a Masters in Curating from Chelsea College of Arts and previously held the role of Curator at Ty Pawb, Wrexham.