

To Maria Hlavajova

12 July 2014



Bologna ArcadesImage courtesy Christos Theodorou

Maria Hlavajova
Utrecht, Netherlands

Berlin, Germany
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Dear Maria

Thanks for your presentation at the International Biennial Association convention Why Biennial? Why Associate? earlier this week. Probably, in public or private, some participants took issue with many of your remarks.

I liked what you said about the relationship between biennials and the cities that are their platforms or frames or bases or resources or primary publics. We're thinking about this in relation to Liverpool. I work for Sally Tallant as a Curatorial Correspondent for the Liverpool Biennial. We have a plan to bring you into a conversation with us around the place of this biennial in its city.

In the coming weeks, you'll receive an invitation to a series of sessions titled: **The Resident**. Sally has been calling it 'a collective brain'. It's an evolving, inclusive group of invited discussants coming together over the course of a week to explore the ways in which a biennial can (and, I guess, cannot) connect to its local environment. For sure, this concerns Liverpool — we want to know what can and cannot take place in that city, both thanks to, and despite it — but I expect that the topic of Liverpool won't be able to contain the things we'll want to ask and tell each other.

We have questions that are not local to Liverpool and the UK. We need to be able to recognise meaningful **correspondences** between Liverpool and other places, ones that aren't arbitrary, reductive or bogus. For me, in my role, this means finding ways to write between various places that may be relevant (relevance is a trap, I know) for Liverpool, and for biennial practice in that city.

I hope you can join us. If you can come, let me suggest some things to consider in advance, based upon what I heard you say at the convention in Berlin this week.

There's a question of **scarcity** vs. **surplus**. For example, the scarcity of resources in a city vs. the

surplus of biennials. Is it best that biennials reside in cities where resources — cultural resources, at least — are scarce? What is the experience of a scarcity of cultural resources? With the weary metaphor of parachuting in (curators, artists), has the reference, all this time, been to personnel or supplies (biennial as air lift)? In either case, parachuting in only happens when the land borders are guarded or closed or otherwise impassable. Why are the borders impassable?

What does it mean to make resources mutual?

Are we more sensitive to the economies of biennials, and the conditions on which biennials rely, than to those of other institutional forms, such as museums? It cannot be the money at stake, since biennials are, for the most part, relatively poor. It may be that biennial funding represents itself as money that could have been used in other ways; or at least that it's possible that those funds could **at any moment** be used in other ways. This is the predicament of temporary minimum-infrastructure institutions: it's easier for them to cease to be.

How can biennials disclose the political and economic conditions of their realisation? I liked your distinction between powerless politics and apolitical power, where politics = the ability to think through solutions, and power = the ability to implement solutions.

(Did you catch Bourriaud's definition of a biennial? Biennial = exhibition + event.)

Here's another context for you: this morning, I was at that nice art bookstore in Mitte, the one up the street from Kunst-Werke, heading east. I bought a copy of The Universitas Project, the proceedings of that strange, quixotic initiative that Emilio Ambasz pursued in the early 1970s, while he was curator of architecture and design at MoMA. It's a replacement copy, in fact; I lost my first one on a train in the Potteries.

I mention it because the Liverpool Biennial has just published an issue of its nascent online journal Stages on the topic Future City. Take a look at that. The texts derive from a conference that the Biennial (others there, not me) convened last year. I think it provides a back story, one of several back stories, to what we want to do with **The Resident**. I don't know whether my colleagues would agree. In a way, hopefully, **The Resident** can complement the speculative character of Future City — it can be more rooted in the present, and more centred on lived experience. A few people told me that Future City spent much of its time, oddly, reflecting on the past — looking back to move forward, I guess. By the way, Maria, I know you have a project titled Future Publics. I want to learn more from you about that.

Anyway, 'Universitas Project' was originally the subtitle of a kind of collaborative research process, a kind of temporary think-tank — titled **Institutions for a Post-Technological Society** — which sought to evolve a new kind of design school to better address the problems of cities. The process began with a so-called postulative stage, in the form of a multi-day series of sessions held in the members' penthouse at MoMA in January 1972. Notable figures from many branches of theory were invited: Castells, Baudrillard, Krauss... Before it could enter an implementation stage, the project was discontinued. Now it exists only as the book I just re-bought: a sprawling collection of proposals and responses, published in 2006 under the title **The Universitas Project: Solutions for a Post-Technological Society**. Institutions, solutions. Essentially, it's a book about the infrastructure of cities in the Information Age. I should lend it to you.

The Universitas Project has a Project Working Paper, as Ambasz calls it — a case statement to which others can respond. I'm wondering if the process we're calling **The Resident** needs something similar.

Ambasz had two questions. (What should ours be?)

Obviously, the search for such a mode of thought [to underwrite the new design education] would require a full-fledged body of interdisciplinary imagination and analysis. Two questions, then, present themselves to mind: First, which problem area of the man-made milieu would render the maximum possibilities for research and insight? Second, do our present educational and research institutions have sufficient scope for the establishment of an interdisciplinary exchange, and do they have the power necessary for putting their design proposals into practice?

Today, these questions are too familiar. There's the call for interdisciplinarity. There's the city as a problem. What would be an approach to cities that doesn't see cities as sets of problems?

Still, the answer to his first question is cities, and more specifically, Manhattan. His Project Working Paper includes a beautiful, loaded and nutty section titled 'Manhattan: Capital of the XXth Century' (in homage to Benjamin, Paris and the nineteenth century). It claims that the infrastructure of Manhattan 'in all the complexity of its physical organization, the capacity of its input-output mechanism, and the versatility of its control devices – [is] the most representative urban artifact of our culture.' It also proposes that this infrastructure might be translated or relocated to many or any locations. But that's just infrastructure.

The next step is, then, for all to undertake the postulation of its possible structures. The methods may belong either to remembrance or to invention, for, conceived as the idea rather than as the actual configuration, Manhattan's infrastructure provides the framework in which all crystalized fragments rescued from the city of the memory and all figments envisioned for the city of the imagination may dwell in ensemble, if not by reason of their casual relationships (since no reconstruction is hereby intended), then by grace of their affinities. The outcome of such an undertaking may be agitational, and render, if not actual proposals of structures, at least an explicit Inventory of Qualities of urban existence toward a yet to be defined City of Open Presents.

There's a temptation, Maria, to propose an ideal candidate for the capital of the twenty-first century (that's to say, perhaps, a candidate for the capital of the ideal twenty-first century) – let me give in to it, momentarily, and refer you to Achille Mbembe & Sarah Nuttall's Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis, 2008, and Lindsay Bremner's Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg, 2010 – though most likely, since the alliance of history and geography isn't what it used to be, this 'capital of the century' device won't work for our times.

Let me cite Ambasz's own list of 'surviving fragments of the memory of the infrastructure', and leave it at that. I hope to see you in Liverpool.

Bologna's arcades,
Osip Mandelstam's St Petersburg,
John Nash's Regent's Park,
Gabriel's Petit Trianon,
Latsura's Promenades to Observe the Sunset,
Mies's Barcelona Pavilion,
Wallace Stevens's Wind on a Wheatfield,
John Soane's house,
Frank Zappa's Los Angeles,
Baudelaire's Fleeting Instants,
Debussy's Submerged Cathedral,
Michael Heizer's land marks,
Joan Littlewood's Fun Palace,
Ray Bradbury's Brown Clouds,
Le Notre's Gardens of Chantilly...

Best wishes

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