

# To Nina Edge

6 March 2015



Kelvin GrovelImage courtesy Nina Edge

Nina Edge  
Liverpool, UK

San Francisco, USA  
6 March 2015

Dear Nina

I'm looking at the notes from **The Resident**. Did you say that Liverpool had a public health service before anywhere else?

It strikes me, working in the UK for the first time in years, how closely the arts and healthcare may be related in the collective mind. They're seen as contents of the common good. I think elements of the conversation during **The Resident** were grounded in a shared assumption that art is a public service — like public health, public education, public infrastructure, or (why not?) police, prisons and the military. Is it just that the source of the funding is the same (taxes)? Or perhaps it's not that art as such is a public service, but that art produced or supported by public institutions is or should be.

Oddly, at the same time, there's resistance (we heard this in the room at **The Resident**) to the idea that art institutions might aim to 'help' or 'enable' someone, a community.

Should the Liverpool Biennial be trying to help someone? Is it a tool?

So many striking correspondences emerge from the notes. One is the tale of two kitchens: yours and the one that staged the Nixon-Khrushchev 'kitchen debate', as featured in Joseph Grima's talk. The two kitchens have little in common — except that they're both domestic spaces serving as ideological theatres or battlefields. 'You mustn't be afraid of ideas' — Nixon keeps repeating, in the face of his opponent's bluster, as if that's what's most at stake.

Thank you for inviting us all into your home, and telling the story, in your kitchen, of the (still ongoing) impact of Housing Market Renewal policies, of the Welsh Streets Home Group and a decade or more of housing activism. I know it's a story you've had to tell many times.

I especially appreciated what you said about the role of the visual, in the context of the HMR struggles

and since. For example, the role of visualisations, including the role of **drawing**, in imagining alternative futures for the condemned streets. Plus the role of photography and graphic design in the campaign's communications. It becomes possible to distinguish between a visual practice that's a tool within the housing crisis and its struggles, and an art that ameliorates that crisis.

Thanks for directing me to your text 'Third Party, Fire and Theft' in Cultural hijack: rethinking intervention. The interference between art and activism comes across clearly. You cover the role that the Liverpool Biennial has had in the past. I think too many of us during **The Resident** didn't know enough about that history. This passage from the text, for example, seems like something to bear in mind as we go along (it refers to activities during the 2008 Capital of Culture, I think — pre-dating almost everyone who now works for the Liverpool Biennial):

"Liverpool Biennial ran projects in the HMR territories. A row of terraces features on their website — by now an iconic image. The Biennial appointed a dedicated HMR Public Realm project manager. He said they aimed to 'bring a creative angle to discussions with people about place'. The Biennial received money from one government quango, Arts Council England, while the HMR project manager's post was funded by another quango, HMR, through the latter's communications budget, normally associated with public relations or image. The association raises complex questions. What does it mean when two government quangos combine to commission an artwork? When an independent-looking arts organization is patronized by a policy delivery agent such as HMR which uses legal compulsion to impose site assembly? What if 'a creative angle to discussions with people about place' fostered criticism or impacted decision-making?"

I know you had major criticisms of the project I presented — Inhabitant, for instance, in relation to the performed speech and its substitution of the topic of gentrification (urgent for the local community) for that of water, politically charged but more remote. I don't think I can convince you of the meaning of that change. but you might want to look up early projects by Sello Peso, especially the In House series, performances in homes in townships outside Johannesburg.

Sally opened the final day of **The Resident** by asking: how can a biennial operate in relation to questions pressing in the local community? Everything depends on what's meant by 'in relation to'. Change that to 'in the presence of', and we have a quite different scenario.

Thanks Nina.

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