- Chris, Where Have You Been? - I Don't Know!!!

Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas

Andreas Angelidakis, Collider, 2016. Installation view at Cains Brewery. Liverpool Biennial 2016. Photo: Mark McNulty.

- Raimundas Malasauskas and Francesco Manacorda in conversation

What would be good to ask each other as co-curators of the Liverpool Biennial 2016, is what did and what didn't work. And then we can talk more in detail about the structure of the exhibition: the value of the episodic, simultaneity, and the idea of accumulation of knowledge produced by such a structure – the idea that you build up more knowledge of a single artist the more episodes you see.

I remember one visitor saying that his experience was that the more works by an artist he saw in different episodes, the more deeply he understood the work seen previously. So the episode in which the work was placed produced a progressive accumulation of knowledge. He was talking about Betty Woodman, and he was saying that he saw her fountain at Liverpool Dock and then *Kimono Ladies* at Cains Brewery, and that he understood her works better once he'd seen her mural at Tate. That was one of the best feedbacks of the exhibition.

I don't think the accumulative effect works for everyone, but it is remarkable that somebody had an experience of what we were trying to create in relation to the episodic as a different gnoseological procedure, which we imported from the episodic structure of a television police or legal procedural drama. In those series you get to know the characters as you see them in different situations across your own time. For example, in *The X Files*, you accumulate knowledge of and develop an affective connection to Mulder and Scully as you see them investigating different cases. Every episode, there's a different problem and you grow into the knowledge of the character. In that sense, I think that we captured something with the idea that you show five, six, seven, eight works by the same artist in different contexts, which provides a different knowledge path than seeing a retrospective where the sequence of works either coincides with the artist's bio or is based around clusters of works. That's how we thought of the whole exhibition structure at the beginning, positing that there are different worlds with the same characters – whether we consider the characters to be artworks or artists – and the same artwork by the same artist could be read and experienced differently in different settings.

The reason why I find the episodic interesting isn't necessarily because of the TV series, but because

we already live, due to technology, in separate worlds that we can enter at any minute. You can have a conversation with somebody via text message in Hong Kong while you're also in a meeting in Liverpool. It's not necessarily a new thing, but the idea that we can jump from one world to another is made easier and more visible because of technology.

That's what technology does: it connects you with Hong Kong or your grandmother, who probably lives in the 1950s, even if she's in 2017, and at the same time it separates us. But the idea that you can jump from one world to another already presupposes that there are individualities and identities of specific worlds, that they're separate from each other. Where does that initial separation of things come from?

It's like the monolith in Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey*: when we first encounter that monolith, humanity is at an early stage, still apes, but the same monolith reemerges in the future, when evolution is at a very advanced stage. In that film, the monolith is something unchanging, while everything else changes.

What I enjoyed in the work we did for the biennial was that we essentially treated the works, the objects, as people, or more precisely, artistic practice as people with a biography. It's like with a character such as Homer Simpson: you grow to know him as you see how he behaves in a particular ecosystem, world, set of relations, how he does or doesn't sort out a problem. I think that was an amazing approach for artistic practice, because you're not trying to say, 'This is an object, and this is its meaning'. You can create the space in your head, or develop feelings for this object that produce meaning according to what you project onto it. It's as if the artists have lives and that life grows on you, in relation to where it's placed, and which fiction it's placed in within the narratological system we put together.

We spoke about how many parallel universes were happening at the same time in the city, and it also sort of harnessed the city's potential. You could take the same idea of an artwork in different sets, having different lives (like that monolith), and the whole biennial could be just one artwork located in different sets. So imagine installing a sculpture by Paul McCarthy, for example, in different parts of the city – it's the same sculpture but it does different things in different settings. It's a more abstract way of thinking about what that artwork could be.

Also it's nice to think of artistic practices as a living organism, as a sort of continuity that you show in different situations, and that creates an interesting play of repetition and difference. I remember how we envisaged this effect for the Rita McBride's *Perfiles*, when we decided to distribute them across different episodes so that they would have very different lives, but when we tried, we also felt that the idea was too abstract and didn't deliver the intended result. When you follow an abstract idea, at some point you have to deal with its concrete life, which is often quite different from what you imagined it would be. With that specific piece, its abstraction clashed with the concrete world. In order to find the best situation for each of those sculptures, we would have had to curate the whole exhibition around just that one piece.

After the opening, we all agreed that reducing the number of episodes would have made it easier for the public: it would have allowed us to have much clearer fictional markers. For example, why did the Greek episode at Tate and the Chinatown episode in the cinema work best? Because the fictional markers were well developed, so that audiences could read a story or a set of relations like an ecosystem, into which we inserted certain artworks that functioned as ecosystemic elements. In the Ancient Greece episode at Tate, the statues readily signalled the fiction of time travelling, and in the cinema it was due to the building, the setup and the atmosphere, plus the script read by Marcos Lutyens. The Greek statues and Markus's script, in relation to each building, were good enough fictional markers to allow people to understand that they were entering into a world, into a parallel universe, where things that normally don't happen could happen. We didn't achieve that in other places, definitely not in the Cains Brewery site, whereas the Oratorium had a bit of that.

That's also about how something can be contained within the parameters of the composition. The artworks needed to be transplanted into what we called the ecosystemic fiction without being rejected or

rejecting it – like in organ transplant.

The problem with the container you're talking about is a very good point that we used while trying to figure out Cains: the Andreas Angelidakis' *Collider* was merely an architectural marker, and not an ecosytemic fiction marker that could tell you through its three-dimensional presence that you were in a different world. When you were in the corridor, you entered a different world, but that wasn't enough to conjure up an overall fiction or parallel dimension. At the centre of the collider, the Children episode was much more intuitive, and thereby more successful, because of the joined-up attitude between works: all the elements there allowed you to imagine yourself in a different world.

Imagine if the exhibition in Cains had been there for the following couple of years, and if during that period, other artists or whoever came there had a go at rearranging it. It could also involve local or small businesses or cafes settling themselves inside the exhibition. That would make it something completely different, so that the boundaries that we were trying to make (the markers of fiction) would be blurred with much more concrete social living, and would become something that the next biennial could build on.

That would be the organic growth of worlds around the artworks – very interesting and Ballardian – the reverse of our process because the fiction would grow after the positioning of the works. Maybe what we didn't pay enough attention to was the growing of those worlds in advance of the pieces arriving. That would be exhibition design as fictional sets. Sometimes the settings were readymade, completely preexisting, like for Lara Favaretto's *Momentary Monument*, the street being a complete narrative that's pretty easy to figure out through a wall text or just by knowing the history of the city. Essentially, you've got a big narrative there. So the idea of 'fiction-specificity' that we were trying to address worked there because the fiction was already there. While in other places it wasn't there and we probably didn't design it enough or well enough to allow people to suspend their disbelief. Because what we were trying to do was to experiment with the idea of the contemporaneity of different fictions, and the idea was to activate the fictions that were inside the city as parallel worlds, not in metaphor, but in reality.

Across the years, we've had many conversations about the idea of simultaneity as opposed to contemporaneity, which very often in exhibition-making can lead to an interesting swapping of parameters between space and time. For the Liverpool Biennial, that's what we did in order to activate the notion of time travel. For example, at Tate, we placed something from the second century AD in front of something from 2016. Such a juxtaposition allowed the postulation, by sympathetic magic, that the two pieces were contemporary because they were in the same space, essentially equating the shared space with a fictional shared time. This is what you can do with curating – locate things that come from different places or different times in the same space, and then say that they're simultaneous. They're contemporary in their existence today, even though they weren't contemporary in their origin. But in another universe, they are actually completely contemporary, and they were born on the same day. This is essentially what we did with the Greek and Roman statues we selected, because they were assemblages of different fragments from different times. And what the eighteenth-century Italian restorers had done with these statues, by piecing disparate parts together to make a whole, was exactly the same thing – they assembled different periods, saying 'This is all from the same time.'

This sheds new light on our idea of 'one day' – when we wanted one of the episodes to be located on a particular day of the calendar (with no specified year). Early on, we even did an event where people suggested which day to choose. You could think of a specific day – 1 March 1968, for example, or it could be 1798. The idea is that it's always March 1, but unlike the film *Groundhog Day*, in which the same day starts again every morning, the calendar moves year to year, rather than day to day, staying on 1 March. So you travel to 1 March and cross different years and different times, as far back and forward as the calendar reaches.

Time travel is always depicted as the process of passing from one dimension into the other, like multiple parallel universes, but it becomes very interesting when those thresholds don't exist at all.

That was a major curatorial debate that we had, and we were on opposing lobbies, about on the one hand making more markers of thresholds and on the other hand the dissolution of the thresholds, and somehow they both needed to exist as a double force.

It became very interesting in the ABC cinema as a curatorial principle because the thresholds between the works were much less identifiable. There was no separation. I don't think that made it a 'total' work of art, likening curatorial work to an artist's work; it was much more like blurring the marks of definition and identity. In retrospect, I think that was the single most important element of the Biennial: this idea of a post-trans cultural condition where thresholds become less relevant: there is no such thing as 'trans' as in sexual transition, or trans-passing, as a moment in which you leave one realm and you enter another one, because that boundary becomes meaningless. The potential of disregarding thresholds opens up more possibilities for knowledge. The idea that you can't say whether the work is by Céline Condorelli or Giraud Siboni makes the presence of those two works in the same space more fertile for the production of new ideas and feelings. It relies more on the person who's perceiving it. There's no bad effect on the work, because after the exhibition finishes the work goes somewhere else, and it still retains its identity. But that moment of not knowing is very evocative. This is why one great piece of feedback that we got is what the designer and curator Prem Krishnamurthy said when he came out of the ABC cinema. He said: 'I have no idea what the fuck that was about', which for me was the best compliment that you can get. It was so effective that he wasn't able to articulate why and what. Imagine if Prem were to enter the ABC cinema sometime much later in his life with the same set of artists, and realised that back then he actually went to the future.

The ambition that we had was to have seven biennials in the same city, to have seven different versions of the same exhibition, which normally you'd plan to do at different times, and this reminded me of your comment when we were at the Conference of the Turin Triennial in 2005, curated by Caroline Christov-Bakargiev and Francesco Bonami, when you said: 'Wouldn't it be fantastic to do the same biennial every two years, with the same artists, over and over again for 100 years?' And somehow, that was the idea that we tried to do, but in space, rather than in time.

I still think that a biennial with the same group of artists through time would be great. But I can already hear the criticism that it descends into nepotism and dynasties. Maybe the problem with the Biennial is that it requires knowledge: in order to understand it, you'd have to see all the episodes. And that's what we did differently here: you had access to all the episodes in the same time and space. But this always happens to a certain level in curatorial work: to understand the next Venice Biennale fully you'd need to have seen at least the last two. Otherwise, you'd be like Chris in the *Family Guy* episode when he gets magically pulled into A-HA's video 'Take on Me'. When he comes out, he's asked where he's been and, just like our friend Prem, he says 'I DON'T KNOW!!!'.

Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas

Francesco Manacorda is Artistic Director at Tate Liverpool. From 2010-12 he was Director of Artissima in Turin, and between 2007 and 2009 was Curator at Barbican Art Gallery, London, where he realised *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* (2008) and *Radical Nature* (2009). He curated *Venetian, Atmospheric,* Tobias Putrih, the Slovenian Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007). He is part of the Curatorial Faculty for Liverpool Biennial 2016.

Raimundas Malasauskas curates often, and writes occasionally. Recent projects include: *In My Previous Life I Wanted to be a Tablet*, Instituto de Vision, Bogota (2015); *Tomorrow night I walked into a dark black star*, Universidad Di Tella, Buenos Aires (2014) and *Oo*, Lithuanian and Cyprus pavilions at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013). He has co-written the libretto of an opera, produced a monthly television show, and was an agent for dOCUMENTA (13).