

Introduction: The Biennial Condition



Lara Favaretto, *Momentary Monument – The Stone*, 2016. Installation view at Welsh Streets, Liverpool Biennial 2016. Photo: Mark McNulty.

Liverpool, April 2017

This issue presents the proceedings from Liverpool Biennial's 2016 conference *The Biennial Condition: On Contemporaneity and the Episodic* that took place in Liverpool in October 2016.[1] Drawing directly on the conference, it brings together the curatorial thinking behind the 2016 Biennial with ideas from Aarhus University's research project *The Contemporary Condition*. [2] It aims to reflect on biennials both as the privileged site for the production of contemporaneity in art and exhibition making, and as episodic instances of contemporary art on a global scale.

Liverpool Biennial 2016 was curated as a story in several episodes, with various fictional worlds sited in galleries, public spaces, disused buildings and online, taking the idea of simultaneity as opposed to linear narration as the grounding principle of the exhibition structure. Assembled by a Curatorial Faculty comprising Sally Tallant, Dominic Willsdon, Francesco Manacorda, Raimundas Malasauskas, Joasia Krysa, Rosie Cooper, Polly Brannan, Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey, Ying Tan, Sandeep Parmar and Steven Cairns, the exhibition took viewers on a series of expeditions through time and space, drawing on Liverpool's past, present and future. These journeys took the form of six 'episodes' presented simultaneously across multiple sites in Liverpool: Ancient Greece, Chinatown, Children's Episode, Software, Monuments from the Future and Flashback. Many of the artists made work for more than one episode, some works were repeated across different episodes, and some venues hosted more than one episode.[3]

Like the conference, this journal takes this idea of 'the episodic' beyond the specificity of the biennial itself, and considers the wider issue of how the transnational biennial format represents the world as an amalgamation of different cultures, operating episodically across times and places, in the dynamic relation between the local and the universal. In this sense biennials can be seen to engage with notions of contemporaneity, a key concept to envision the temporal complexity that follows from the coming together of different times. How do we begin to rethink these deep structures of temporalisation that render our present the way it is, not only with respect to processes of globalisation but also in the light of

micro-temporality, planetary computation, and artistic practices?

This journal features diverse contributions that attempt to address these questions, from a range of curators, artists and researchers. Part of the Liverpool Biennial 2016 Curatorial Faculty, Raimundas Malasauskas and Francesco Manacorda discuss how the exhibition was designed using polyphony, multiverses, contingency, time travel and repetition as display mechanisms and narratological tools. Building on much of his previous work, art historian, art critic and artist Terry Smith explores biennial exhibitions in terms of what he calls 'contemporary composition'. [4] Artistic Director of European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017 and the 2014 Biennale of Sydney, Juliana Engberg reflects on biennials as 'occurrences' and through the logic of topology in which constituent parts can be seen to be interrelated. As well as providing the cover image for the journal [5], artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset make a visual contribution through documentation of their 2009 curated project *The Collectors*, to reflect their biennial experiences: from participating as artists to curating the upcoming 15th Istanbul Biennial 2017. [6] Curator Elisa Atangana reflects on her experience of the Kampala Art Biennial 2016 and the issue of mobility as a marker of social change. In a transcript of her conference talk, Marina Fokidis discusses Documenta 14 held in both Athens and Kassel in 2017, and how the sharing of different pasts, presents and futures impact upon the agency of the biennial form. Lastly, in a glossary form that reflects the object of study of their research project *The Contemporary Condition*, Geoff Cox, Jacob Lund, Anne Kølbaek Iversen and Verina Gfader introduce twelve key concepts (contemporary contemporary; chronophobia; random access memory; real-time; presentism; arrested movement; migration; algo-rhythm; pre-acceleration; iconomy; time stamp and loop). [7]

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this journal do not suggest a unified reading or narrative, but rather a coming together of diverse positions that draw upon experiences of encountering contemporary art and the complexity of its temporal conditions, in which biennials play no small part.

[1] *The Biennial Conference* was organised by Liverpool Biennial and Aarhus University, in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University's Exhibition Research Lab and International Curators Forum (ICF). It took place 8-9 October 2016 at LJMU's John Lennon Art and Design Building.

[2] *The Contemporary Condition* is a research project at Aarhus University made possible by a grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research, which runs for three years from September 2015 to August 2018.

[3] <http://www.biennial.com/2016/exhibition/about>

[4] For an extending discussion of this concept, see Terry Smith, *The Contemporary Composition*, Sternberg Press 2016.

[5] Cover Image: Elmgreen & Dragset, *Traces of a Never Existing History/Powerless Structures*, Fig. 222, 2001. Wood, stainless steel, aluminum, perspex, paint, cement, vinyl profile lettering, fluorescent light 310 x 430 x 780 cm. Courtesy Galerie Klosterfelde. Exhibited at "Egofugal," Istanbul Biennial, 2001. Photo by Kim Nielsen / Muammar Yanmaz

[6] *The Collectors*- Danish and Nordic Pavilions - 53rd Venice Biennale, curated by Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, 7 June - 22 November 2009.

[7] These ideas are further developed in the parallel publication series *The Contemporary Condition*, edited by Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund, published by Sternberg Press.

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Press 2017) and *Writing and Unwriting Media Art History* (MIT Press 2015). She is series editor of DATA Browser (Open Humanities Press) and commissioning editor of contemporary art journal *Stages* published by Liverpool Biennial.