

# Introduction

For five days, in the early autumn of 2014, a group of artists, curators, designers, writers and community organisers gathered to consider how Liverpool Biennial might inhabit its city in more significant ways. Discussions, that week, explored connections between a multiplicity of issues, practices, times and places. Their starting point was the state of housing in the district of Toxteth, Liverpool 8. Partially derelict since the 1980s when changes in industrialisation combined with government policy saw a steep decline in population, the neighbourhood has been a site of conflict and activism, where questions have been raised about local government housing policy. This complex, loaded situation acted as the prompt for a week of research and inquiry.

This issue of Stages is a series of letters that emerged from *The Resident*, written by Dominic Willsdon, Curatorial Correspondent for Liverpool Biennial, and part of the Curatorial Faculty for 2016.

Attendees:

Mike Aitken (Director, Royal Standard)

Stuart Bailey (graphic designer and co-editor of *The Serving Library*)

Francesca Bertolotti (Head of Production and International Projects, Liverpool Biennial)

Bryan Biggs (Artistic Director, the Bluecoat)

Vanessa Boni (Curator of Public Programmes, Liverpool Biennial)

Polly Brannan (Education Curator, Liverpool Biennial)

Adam Chodzko (artist)

Nina Edge (artist and activist)

Ellen Grieg (Assistant Curator, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Joseph Grima (Curatorial Correspondent, Liverpool Biennial)

James Harper (Director, Royal Standard)

Elizabeth Hayden (Education Intern, Liverpool Biennial)

Maria Hlavajova (Artistic Director, BAK)

Irene Hoffman (Phillips Director and Chief Curator, SITE Santa Fe)

Kevin Hunt (artist)

Samantha Jones (artist)

Joe Farrag (Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust)

Theresa McDermott (Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust)

Simone Mair (Assistant Curator, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Francesco Manacorda (Artistic Director, Tate Liverpool)

Rosalind Nashashibi (artist)

Sophia Olascoaga (Curator, MUAC)

Louis Palliser-Ames (Director, Royal Standard)

Paula Ridley (Chair, Liverpool Biennial)

Emma Riley (Mediation Fellow, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Laura Robertson (The Double Negative)

Lucia Sanroman (Independent Curator, Mexico / San Diego)

Mike Stubbs (Director, FACT)

Sally Tallant (Director, Liverpool Biennial)

Isobel Whitelegg (Senior Lecturer in Art History and Exhibition Studies at Liverpool John Moores University / Research Curator at Tate Liverpool)

Dominic Willsdon (Curatorial Correspondent, Liverpool Biennial / Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education and Public Practice, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)

Note Takers:

Ameena Atiq (Mediator, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Victoria Ellis (Mediator, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Jenny Gleadhill (Mediation Fellow, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Grace Harrison (Mediation Fellow, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

Holly Rimmer-Tagoe (Mediation Fellow, Liverpool Biennial 2014)

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# To Sally Tallant

28 March 2014

Sally Tallant  
Liverpool, UK

London, UK  
28 March 2014

I think you're right about the week of sessions we're planning to do in September or October. It is not a symposium. It is not a school. It is not a curatorial intensive. It is not a think tank. It is nothing like Future City, for sure. It is not a residency, though it should drive the Biennial's institutional learning in the way that your residency in Banff did. Plus, its scope of inquiry may relate to the nature of residency and residences – to residing, abiding, homemaking, inhabiting, dwelling. I still like our working title **Letters From Home**.

Liverpool Biennial should be a set of relationships. Somehow, we need to identify correspondences between very different times and places, and between different groups and individuals. We need to combine an intimate, relationship-based process (confessing its gaps and secrets), with various forms of public, even spectacular, display.

I return home tomorrow. See you in July.

Who no know, go know!

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28 March 2014

# To Polly Brannan

9 July 2014

Polly Brannan  
Liverpool, UK

Madrid, Spain  
9 July 2014

Hi Polly

Yesterday, I had the chance to see Playgrounds: Reinventing the Square, the exhibition at the Reina Sofia that you and I were wondering about. It was much more about contemporary spaces of public protest — Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park, Frank Ogawa Plaza — than I expected. But there were also a lot of historical texts and images of play and pedagogy in urban spaces; a lot about how children use cities, especially in the mid-to-late twentieth century. I wish you could have seen that material: it would have been interesting to you in relation to your work for the Liverpool Biennial. It reminded me of Colin Ward's anarchistic urban pedagogy and especially his book from the 1970s, The Child in the City. Do you know it? Like **Playgrounds**, it's an account of how children can and cannot reside in cities, and about the pedagogical implications of that.

By the way, somebody (maybe Vanessa) told me that you were thinking of titling our fall sessions **The Resident**. Sounds good to me. Every story needs a protagonist (and each story has only one, so I'm told). I look forward to hearing what you have in mind for the structure of that week, and for the list of participants to be invited.

I'm going to join Sally and Vanessa in Berlin tomorrow.

See you in September.

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9 July 2014

# To Mikhael Subotzky

28 March 2014





Michael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse, *Ponte City*, detail. 2011

Mikhael Subotzky  
Johannesburg, South Africa

London, UK  
28 March 2014

Dear Mikhael

I got your message. We'll send your studio some photographs of the Ponte City installation now on view in San Francisco. It's quite different from the installation of the same work at the 2012 Liverpool Biennial, where I first saw it.

I was in Liverpool yesterday, as it happens. The Biennial there has commissioned me to be a 'Curatorial Correspondent' — we'll see what that might mean: I guess I'll be writing to and from the Biennial, from Liverpool and from elsewhere. It should be impossible to get it wrong.

I have a question for you, related to **Ponte City**. We're planning the book that will accompany, or rather follow, the San Francisco show. It's going to include a range of writing genres, including more literary, diaristic, even epistolary texts and lyrical modes — we think this befits a project about **intimacy**. As someone once wrote: the epic is heard, the lyric is overheard. We have a list of several texts suggested by you, from your own planned book. Thank you. My favourite is the quasi-fictional piece by Harry Kalmar on the visit of Italo Calvino to Ponte, not long, I suppose, after it was first occupied. Question is: do you know of any texts that address what it's like to be a **resident** of Ponte City? We lack the voices of the residents.

By the way, it's useful to be showing a project like yours that's so much to do with residential housing, in a city that's experiencing such a housing crisis. That crisis has escalated even in the last year, since we first talked about this. The number of expulsions is growing.

You must know Vaughn Sadie. He lives near you in the old Ansteys Building in the Central Business District. Two weeks ago, we staged the site-responsive performance that he conceived with the choreographer Sello Pesa. It's titled Inhabitant. They performed it at the intersection of 24<sup>th</sup> Street and Mission Street in San Francisco (on the plaza above my local subway station). It was originally staged in

the street outside your studio, along the frontier between new Maboneng and the rest of old Jeppestown. Forces of aggressive redevelopment bear upon both those sites. In each place the needs of some collide with the desires of others, and the ability of many to inhabit the city is in doubt – like Ponte City, but outdoors.

Not knowing Liverpool so well, I realise I cannot say what sites in that city might carry the same value, or serve the same role. Where in Liverpool – which buildings, which street corners – most symbolises the crisis of housing in that city? I cannot say, but others could.

It's our question, not yours.

In the fall, there's going to be a week-long series of sessions concerning, in various ways, what it means for an organisation such as the Liverpool Biennial to inhabit the city, and beyond that, perhaps, what it means for artists to reside there. Doubtless, we'll have to begin by asking how, nowadays, the residents of the city are and are not able to inhabit it.

Best wishes

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28 March 2014

# To Maria Hlavajova

12 July 2014



Bologna ArcadesImage courtesy Christos Theodorou

Maria Hlavajova  
Utrecht, Netherlands

Berlin, Germany  
12 July 2014

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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12 July 2014

# To Osvaldo Sanchez

20 July 2014

Oswaldo Sanchez  
Mexico City, Mexico

San Francisco, California  
20 July 2014

Dear Oswaldo,

I'm going to be in DF at the end of next month, and I wanted to ask if we could meet up. Lucía Sanromán told me a bit about the new manifestation of inSite: your Casa Gallina. I'm intrigued by the idea that a biennial — or a recurring, temporary exhibition platform such as inSite has been — would move to take up permanent residence somewhere, indeed permanent residence **elsewhere**. What does it mean for a biennial to reside in a city, or in a particular neighbourhood? And what does it mean for a biennial to move from the city, or cities, with which it's identified (in the case of inSite: San Diego/Tijuana) to another?

Best wishes

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PS: Thanks to Josh Kun, I now have Sueños de California, Los Tijuana Five's cover version of the Mamas and the Papas, stuck in my head — *mia* California, remember? And the aural border.

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20 July 2014



# To Lucía Sanromán and Sofía Olascoaga

29 August 2014

Lucía Sanromán and Sofía Olascoaga  
Mexico City, Mexico

Mexico City, Mexico  
29 August 2014

Lucía and Sofía

So, as we discussed in the garden of Alumnos 47 yesterday, this is the plan for Day 4 of **The Resident**, 2 October, the day assigned to us to lead. Each of us will propose a number of **episodes** that can be five or ten minutes long (if you want to do a twenty-minute episode, that's okay). Then we can review the episodes, find an order, add or subtract if we want to, and decide where the intervals should be. This will be the main content of the morning. The afternoon will be devoted to group work. Sofía could implement some group-work techniques from radical pedagogy.

Concerning the focus of the episodes, here my notes from yesterday:

D: on the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial and the claims — which I heard Olu Oguibe reference once more recently — that its inability to connect with its place and time, in 1997, is a major reason why there have been no further editions of that biennial. Plus the question of whether — and if so, how — contemporary art in South Africa has been marked by the absence of the Johannesburg Biennial in subsequent years. What resources have been denied by its absence? Did I mention those lines by Gabi Ngcobo in the catalogue of The Ungovernables? If I remember correctly, she describes the 2nd Johannesburg Biennial as the kind uncle, who bore gifts and never returned, and whom 'the children' are obliged to miss.

L: on SITELines and reformulating the SITE Santa Fe biennial, led by Irene Hofmann, in order to make it more incisive concerning notions of place and especially regionalism — specifically, the aim to connect SITELines to the history of New Mexico, including the exclusion of Native American, Spanish, and now Hispanic narratives. It would be good to explain how this plays out in SITELines 2014. By the way, it's great that Irene will be able to join us in Liverpool.

D: on the project Inhabitant, which I co-commissioned earlier this year. It translates a performance (that's also an urban-research project) from Johannesburg to San Francisco. In between it was also produced in Istanbul (which may be a partner city for Liverpool). If it has a topic, it's gentrification. We may wish to discuss the question of translation — not only of language, but of actions, of gestures, from one place to another.

L: on your 'retrospective' of inSite (San Diego/Tijuana) in Cuernavaca. You plan to present the timeline to explain the ways in which inSite tracked the development of site-specificity in the 1990s. You'll explain how this history was presented in the exhibition space in Cuernavaca, and address the failed attempt to revisit five key projects throughout that city.

D: on my (ill-informed) perspective on the new direction of InSite. I'm interested in this as a further example of a 'biennial' moving towards an ongoing, community-based model. I have only personal perceptions from visiting with Osvaldo this week. I can relate/contrast this to what Liverpool Biennial has in mind — and at a conceptual level, speak to Osvaldo's claim that the neighbourhood is now a more potent critical tool than the border. I would leave it to Sofía to say what this might mean in the context of Mexico City, and to Lucía to say what it might mean in the context of InSite. Lucía: what is Casa Gallina in your view? In what ways is it continuous with what inSite was before?

L: on the notion of community and civic engagement in Medellín as opposed to that of Antanas Mockus and his Cultura Ciudadana project in Bogota. (By the way, Lucía, you should check out Justin McGuirk's new book Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture.) You plan to discuss these topics through the work commissioned for your Citizen Culture exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art — which just opened on Friday! Congratulations on that. You can explain how the initiatives in both Bogota and Medellín were generated in response to crisis and trauma by enlightened

city governments and their mayors. Address how the relationships between cultural production, urbanism, architecture, and the reformulation of a sense of co-responsibility between citizen and government are powerfully exemplified in these cases — plus a note on the fragility of these administrations.

D: on the exhibition/book Blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After (1998). This is a rare and now somewhat legendary book of photography and texts on the architectural legacies of apartheid. It's a resource for thinking about how cultural practice might address that legacy. For me, there are lessons here for any city that needs to work through trauma — and which city does not?

L: on your own stake in these themes. The story of your relationship to Tijuana and the projects that have resulted from coming to terms with various kinds of urban and social trauma in that city. I've heard you say that all the projects you've done since 2010 as an independent curator are, in some ways, responses to curiosities, frustrations and intuitions about how culture can function to oppose social and political dissolution and entropy.

Sofía: you need to add your episodes to this list.

I look forward to seeing you both in Liverpool.

Best wishes

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29 August 2014

# To Paula Ridley

29 September 2014



tenantspin/FACT, 2013

Paula Ridley  
Liverpool, UK

Liverpool, UK  
29 September 2014

Dear Paula

Thanks for your presence today at **The Resident**. Thanks especially for your remarks on the politics of housing — and not just the politics, but the emotional psychology of housing. Somehow, the distance between your past role as chair of Housing Action Trust in Liverpool and your present role as chair of the Liverpool Biennial seems both small and vast. It's hard to measure. In a way, in these first couple of days of **The Resident**, we're all trying to feel our way towards an understanding of how, if at all, the Liverpool Biennial can touch the city's present housing crisis — building, of course, on the work of Homebaked.

Thanks for bringing up the Tenantspin project from some years ago; that's a valuable point of reference. I'd love to understand better the role of the artists, Superflex, in that case, as well as the methodologies of community engagement that were employed, and the role of Arena Housing. Clearly, Tenantspin was marked by a responsiveness to the needs and interests of the residents.

Are there lessons for the Liverpool Biennial today and in the future? We heard the questions today. Does the Biennial have the expertise and capacities to be involved in housing in a sustained way? Should it assume a responsibility for supporting community spaces? What should be the role of an arts organisation in urban regeneration, or what we could call urban defence? Is it even the role of the Liverpool Biennial to have a political agency?

Let's see whether, tomorrow, the group feels that the needs of the housing crisis would either: 1. nourish a vision for the role of the Biennial in the city; 2. trap it in a set of responsibilities that are impossible to fulfill; or 3. become something we touch at a tangent. Is there a fourth option?

Did you also work with culture and housing in Pittsburgh? I'd be interested to know if there are lessons for us from that city or others like it.

Best wishes

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29 September 2014

# To Lucía Sanromán

30 September 2014

Lucía Sanromán  
Madrid, Spain

Liverpool, UK  
30 September 2014

L

We're two days into The Resident, and we look forward to seeing you and Irene here on Thursday. I thought I'd send you some notes about the discussions so far, to give you both a sense of the context you're arriving in. It will still be great for you to speak about: a) the exhibition on the history of inSite that you presented in Cuernavaca and b) on SITELines, with Irene — it will be helpful for us here to understand from the two of you the considerations around presenting a biennial in a city as different from this one as Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Here are some of the questions, desires, complaints, dreams etc. that have come up during our first day. I hope this will help.

Several participants are asking what the Liverpool Biennial is for. These are mainly questions about its extra-artistic value — whatever the value of the art, what is the value of the organisational practice of the Biennial, year on year? Sometimes people have social, cultural or urban development in mind. Relatedly, there are questions about what kinds of capacity the Biennial can build for the city, including for artists here in Liverpool.

We've also been asking about the difference between biennials and museums. These are questions of infrastructure, or institutionality — for example, whether the museum needs to devote so many resources (time, money...) to reproducing itself, in ways that can produce value for others only at its margins. How are institutions obliged to produce? For Maria Hlavajova, this includes the institutional drive to say things whether or not we have something to say.

Clearly, Sally values what she sees as the inherently productive nature of the biennial as such.

There was some discussion of what it might mean for a biennial to be driven by a multi-year research agenda. I know that's something that SITELines is thinking about.

One other issue that came up a lot: spectacle. Spectacle is a big question here in Liverpool, in relation to the Liverpool Biennial, in ways that I hadn't expected, and that I don't yet understand.

Yesterday afternoon, we visited some neighbourhoods in Toxteth: the Welsh Streets and the Granby Triangle (or Granby Four Streets). We were taken on a tour by Jimmy Jagne and Joe Farrage, who are residents and members of the Community Land Trust.

This afternoon, we visited the home of Nina Edge, an artist and activist here, who's another participant in The Resident this week. Her house, listed for demolition in 2005, is a hold-out against the dismantling of the surrounding neighbourhood. Hers is a practice of domestic residence as political resistance. She is not alone.

The fact that housing is such a charged issue here, alongside the desire of the Liverpool Biennial to support artists as residents in various ways — encourages us to feel that the community work around housing and the curatorial and educational work of the Biennial might converge. Some of the time, this convergence can seem both necessary (for the Biennial, at least) and impossible.

On Thursday, we'll be meeting at The Florrie.

See you there.

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30 September 2014



# To George Groves

1 October 2014



The Park Palace, 2014 Image courtesy ReptOn1x / Wikimedia Commons

George Groves  
Hollywood, USA

Liverpool, UK  
1 October 2014

Dear Mr Groves

I write to you from the future. It's well into the twenty-first century. I cannot begin to explain how much the technologies of movie-making have changed. Films no longer depict a performance (of acting, singing, dancing etc) mediated by technology, but consist of worlds wholly created by machines. 'Machines' isn't even the correct word anymore. I'm not from Liverpool, but I get the sense that people here are still proud of your role in the history of movies, creating sound where before there was none. They still remember the Quiet Little Englishman.

I thought to write to you because, the day before yesterday, I visited the ruins of your theatre, The Park Palace. I was in a group being introduced to some local histories. Our guide was a man named Joe MacFarrag — an artist and community activist, living and working in what's now known as L8. Joe told us about the early decades of the Park Palace, after its founding in 1903, and then the years when, he said (I guess it's true) that it was Julia Lennon's favourite night out.

During the years you worked there, I suppose there was still a chapel next door — there's just a gap of grass between buildings now, a gap disguised as a small public park. It's curious to me, the way in which religion is intertwined in the history of the place: how it sits on the boundary between Catholic and Protestant areas; the Orange lodge across the way. For a while, the profits from the cinema were secretly funnelled into the building of a Catholic hall in the Protestant area.

When the cinema closed in the late 1950s, the Park Palace became a pharmacy, then a squash court for taxi drivers. It functions as furniture storage right now, but it's been sold for housing — what quality of housing, I don't know.

There's a proposal to host a horse-riding school.

On the front door, there's graffiti that reads 'You're Marvin Gaye'.

Yours sincerely

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1 October 2014

**To Samantha Jones**

2 October 2014



2Up2Down / Homebaked, Jeanne van Heeswijk

Samantha Jones  
Liverpool, UK

Liverpool, UK  
2 October 2014

Dear Sam

It was good to have the chance to visit Homebaked again on Tuesday. In the streets around the bakery, so much has disappeared even since I was first there six months ago.

It's very interesting to me, your idea to commission art for the **gaps**, the negative spaces left behind by the demolition of houses, not least since many of the gaps no longer register as gaps — as Sally pointed out. The more gaps that are created, the fewer gaps appear.

How to visualise the undoing of a neighbourhood over time?

What is the role of such visualisation in the collective task of imagining alternative futures for that neighbourhood?

I very much appreciated your text on Homebaked in issue 2 of Stages. Patience, slowness, resilience — there's a very particular and powerful sense of time and movement in your account: something like the time it takes to move through a glutinous substance.

D

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2 October 2014

# To Sofía Olascoaga

3 October 2014

Sofia Olascoaga  
Liverpool, UK

Liverpool, UK  
3 October 2014

Here, from the notes, for your reference, the questions that came out of your Monday (Day 1) group, with Polly, Laura, Nina and others.

What can the organisation learn? What are its learning goals? What relationships between artists and audiences could the Biennial support? What are the assumptions, if any, about what the other (locally?) needs to learn? Who are the collaborators and who are the audiences? What is the organisation teaching, if anything? Is there an exchange? How does the Liverpool Biennial learn whether its goals are aligned with those of others? What is the relationship between art production and education? What are the barriers to outreach? Does the organisation need to be more imaginative or flexible when engaging people in education programmes? What is expected from the various audiences, or publics? What are the forms of learning expected?

By the way, among many great things you've said already, there were two things that have especially stayed with me:

Your question of whether spectacle is or is not compatible with dialogue. Also: what is it to combine spectacle and assembly?

Your question: what would be the equivalent of a Community Land Trust in a different sphere of public life, or perhaps cultural life?

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3 October 2014

# To Rangoato Hlasane

4 October 2014



Rangoato Hlasane  
Johannesburg, South Africa

Liverpool, UK  
4 October 2014

Hi Ra

I thought of you because I'm working alongside Sofía Olascoaga again this week. She's been discussing her project Between Utopia and Failure, about Iván Illich, radical pedagogy and CIDOC, in Cuernavaca, overlapping with some of what she did in Porto Alegre last year at our conference on equality in education – though I admit I largely missed what she said at that time due to the (very welcome, for sure) anti-elitism protests that day by the mediators of the Mercosul Biennial.

Essentially, Between Utopia and Failure is asking: how can we think of the performance of collective memory as a tool that informs cultural practices?

I hadn't known that, only a few weeks into the public presentation of the project, one of the participants and his wife were murdered.

How was it possible for the participants to continue?

D

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4 October 2014

# To Isobel Whitelegg

7 October 2014



Stafford Beer's Project Cybersyn Operations Room Image courtesy Liverpool John Moores Special Collections and Archives

Isobel Whitelegg  
Liverpool, UK

San Francisco, USA  
7 October 2014

Isobel

Thanks for the suggestion to explore the [Stafford Beer](#) archive in the LJMU library. I spent some time with the materials last week. I've never before given much thought to the history of cybernetics, but I find myself quite interested in Beer's [Cybersyn](#) project applying the cybernetics of organisations to the development of the public sector in Allende's Chile. I have to say that (more than the theories) it's the political and literary (or politico-literary) character of the story that appeals to me. There's a very affecting 'humanistic' aspect to it. You've seen the initial letter of invitation from Allende to Beer from 1971? There's also a letter that, in a way, closes the Cybersyn episode. It's from one of his associates, and was written shortly after the Pinochet coup of 11 September 1973.

My dear Stafford,

When Ross died you cabled: 'Our Ross is dead. Let us celebrate whatever immortality may mean.'  
Your words are in my mind now since our Chile died. Let us mourn mortality for what it is.

In sorrow and pain, and  
in friendship and love  
always your

Heinz

If you'd like to develop some project around this archive, I'd be keen to talk to you about that.

Best wishes

D

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7 October 2014



# To Sanjit Sethi

11 October 2014

Sanjit Sethi  
Santa Fe, USA

San Francisco, USA  
11 October 2014

Hi Sanjit

Obama made me miss my flight. SFO was closed to allow Airforce One to land. I'll have to find another opportunity to visit you and Cristin and the kids in Santa Fe.

And I want to know about the scene there — especially from your point of view, as someone with a background in Community Arts. Never having been to Santa Fe, I can only imagine it as Aspen-in-the-desert. I met Irene Hofmann in Liverpool last week. She was invited there for the discussions taking place this week about — among other things — the relationship between biennials and their locations. When I heard that SITELines was adopting a geographic region, 'the Americas', as a defining scope of inquiry, I wondered about the viability of that, partly, I guess, due to having worked on the Mercosul Biennial last year, which seems to be moving away from the regionalism, 'South America', that had defined it.

In our wider discussions last week about what the Liverpool Biennial could be and do, the example of 100 Families Oakland came up — that must seem a long time ago now. There's a lot of focus here on the conditions of residential life, and the relation of the Biennial to that. Someone wondered whether artists could be hosted by Liverpool families — applying the funds for artists' accommodation to support the residential communities, and facilitating that experience where, though cohabitation, one adapts to others' ways of living.

Love to the family  
D

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11 October 2014

# To Irene Hofmann

14 October 2014

Irene Hofmann  
Santa Fe, USA

San Francisco, USA  
14 October 2014

Dear Irene

Thanks for joining us in Liverpool. I'm sorry your visit had to be brief. It was good that you also got to see [A Needle Walks Into a Haystack](#). Personally, I'm happy to have met you, having now failed to make it to Santa Fe this past weekend. Thank you and Joanne for that invitation. I'm keen to join, at the next stage, the national conversation she's convening.

It was valuable for the group to hear you speak about the challenges of the [SITE](#) Santa Fe biennial — in the form that you inherited: the challenge posed by the disenchantment in the city; the challenge of how to tie a biennial (that brings national and international visitors) to ongoing, year-round programming that serves the local scene; that the institution was seen as elitist, especially by local artists; the discontinuity that had resulted out of a succession of *auteur*-ish guest curators producing biennial editions that celebrate their own tastes (okay, these all are my words not yours).

It was bold of you to cancel the first scheduled biennial after you took up your post. Obviously, you had replacement programming to fill the gap, but still. There are times when it's worth questioning the institutional obligation to **produce** — I was talking about this with Osvaldo Sanchez not long ago; refusing that obligation is central to the reinvention of [inSite](#).

It's very interesting to those of us involved with Liverpool to understand how much your rethinking of the biennial in Santa Fe has dealt with matters of time and place. There's the need for curators to spend more time in the city, to move there, or stay for extended periods there, to build connections with the locality. Allied to this, there's the commitment to research — which necessarily demands a different temporality. I guess we're all saying that research and community cannot be accommodated by the once-every-two-years tempo of the regular biennial.

I cannot speak for others, but your approach to the question of place seems especially bold, perhaps even too much so: to adopt a geographic category, The Americas, as a multi-year, multi-edition theme. I can grasp part-way (since I'm not familiar with the place) what you're saying about Santa Fe as a microcosm of the rest of the US and the story of the Americas. And 'The Americas' is a capacious category, to be sure. I guess I recoil a little from the adoption of a territory as a theme. Or perhaps I'm just theme-averse. That's a common condition nowadays. I'd be interested to ask, however, how close, for you, is the Pan-American idea (in its structure and porosity) to the Pan-African idea?

I also want to ask you more about your micro-grants initiative '[Spread](#)', its manifestation as social events in Santa Fe, and how local artists participate in it.

In every way, Irene, it was good to have you here. We talk a lot about the affinities that the Liverpool Biennial might have to other parts of the world, what relationships we should nurture. It's clear that we share many aspects of your vision.

Someone at **The Resident** said that there may be around 200 biennials, but they all have essentially the same mission statement. How to change that? Does it matter?

Best wishes

D

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14 October 2014



# To Mônica Hoff

2 November 2014

Mônica Hoff  
Porto Alegre, Brazil

San Francisco, USA  
2 November 2014

Hi Mônica

You were in Liverpool recently? I'm sorry to have missed you. I was there the week before for **The Resident** — probably Sally and others told you about it. It seemed to go well. It's hard to bring people together in that way, people with very different perspectives too. It's my job now — as a Curatorial Correspondent — to find a way to write up the record of what was discussed. That record will be published as an edition of the Biennial's online journal Stages. Doubtless, this edition is going to be a 'journal' more in the personal chronicle sense than the academic sense.

So you quit the Mercosul Biennial. No one is surprised. What more was there for you to do there? It was wonderful to have the chance to work with you on the ninth edition last year. It gave me a lot to think about in terms of what it means to be an 'education biennial' — you know that your mediators program from Porto Alegre has become a model for the biennial in Liverpool; small-scale at first, necessarily. It's good that you had the chance to talk to Polly about that. We discussed it a bit during **The Resident** — about the ways in which your programme, over years, over successive biennial editions, became something like a 'periodic college of continuing education', allowing artists and others to gain skills and knowledge that empowered them to participate in the cultural life of the city in deeper or more extensive ways — as artists, teachers, writers, in terms of running art spaces etc.

The Mercosul Biennial will miss your work.

D.

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2 November 2014

# To Rudolf Frieling

8 November 2014



Granby TriangleImage courtesy Charlotte Horn

Rudolf Frieling  
San Francisco, USA

San Francisco, USA  
8 November 2014

R

Thanks for your invitation to write something short about Candice Breitz's Working Class Hero (A Portrait of John Lennon), the piece we have at SFMOMA.

You know, my first art-related job was in Liverpool. I once taught a course in Minimalism and Pop Art in the art department of Liverpool John Moores University (Liverpool College of Art, it used to be called), the school where, decades earlier, John Lennon studied. Lennon, aged seventeen, enrolled in September 1957, a month before he and Paul McCartney shared a stage for the first time. Paul was fifteen; his high school adjoined the college.

I was back in Liverpool recently and took a different kind of tour – one led by artists and activists who are engaged with the housing crisis in the city. They're fighting the alliance between government and business that's dismantling the remaining working-class neighbourhoods. It's said that the old terraces are worth more as bricks in London than they are as houses in Liverpool – one city is consuming the other. The tour began at the former Park Palace theatre, where John Lennon's mother, Julia, often saw movies. She was killed in a car accident in 1958. The Park Palace closed in 1959, became a pharmacy, then a vehicle repair shop, then it fell into disuse. Our tour later stopped at the Empress pub, where John and Ringo used to drink. Mural portraits of the two of them are in alcoves high up on the facade. A Beatles heritage tour group was there too, visiting from Germany.

The Empress features on the cover of Ringo's first solo album, Sentimental Journey, released in 1970, as the Beatles were breaking up. John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band, John's own first solo album, with Ringo on drums, came out later that year. This is the music – so elegiac and severe – that's performed in Breitz's piece by devoted Lennon fans, whom the artist selected through interviews. Julia Lennon's

presence pervades the album, from the first track, 'Mother', to the last, a lullaby titled 'My Mummy's Dead'. In the second-to-last track, 'God', John sings a litany of things in which he doesn't believe, including the Bible, Kennedy, Jesus and the Beatles. As much as anything, 'God' is what deranged Mark David Chapman, the Beatles fan who shot John dead outside the Dakota in New York in December 1980.

Thanks again. Let me see what I can do.

Best

D

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8 November 2014

# To Maria Hlavajova

12 July 2014



Bologna ArcadesImage courtesy Christos Theodorou

Maria Hlavajova  
Utrecht, Netherlands

Berlin, Germany  
12 July 2014

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

D

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12 July 2014

# To Laura Robertson

20 November 2014



The FlorriImage courtesy Charlotte Horn

Laura Robertson  
Liverpool, UK

San Francisco, USA  
20 November 2014

Dear Laura

I received the notes, transcripts etc from the week of **The Resident**. You and your team did an incredible job in capturing the range and texture of the discussions. It's a great document. My task would be impossible without it. Thank you.

It was good to meet you properly, and learn about Double Negative.

Plus, it was good to talk together, especially in our group on the final day, about the place of writing and communications in the context of the Liverpool Biennial, and for art and artists in the city. How to support critical art writing in the city? How might the Biennial generate a collective writing, with broad participation, that has as much weight as the handful of critics writing for the newspapers?

If there can be Curatorial Correspondents, why not Community Correspondents?

Perhaps a writer in residence? Perhaps a publisher in residence?

Doubtless the nature of writing (and publishing) in and around the Biennial would have to change.

Let me know if you still want me to put you in touch with those online art publications in the US.

Best wishes

D

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20 November 2014

# To Joseph Grima

Joseph Grima  
Genoa, Italy

San Francisco, California  
27 November 2014

Dear Joseph

'Take a flat that is one size smaller than what your parents accustomed you to' — I've pocketed that quotation from Le Corbusier you gave us.

If you have any further references (case studies or texts) on the concept of **home**, they'd be much appreciated. You understand better than I do the politics of house and home that have been playing out in Liverpool for some years now. I feel we need a wide range of conceptual tools in hand before engaging with those dynamics much further. Speaking of tools, the discussions during **The Resident** about use value and exchange value (not always by way of those terms) made an impression on me.

Your distinction between the house as a **tool** (with habitation as its primary function) and the house as an **asset** (with capital accumulation as its primary function), and the contemporary conversion of the former into the latter, and the psycho-social implications of that process — that was thought-provoking. As we said, the advent of Airbnb only accelerates the absorption of zones of intimacy into the financial system.

It was notable that several argued that there's still a **class** dimension to the relative notions of 'home'. Perhaps it was that 'house-as-tool' tracks a working-class set of values, and 'house-as-asset' tracks a middle-class set. I don't know what you'd say to that. I may have it wrong, in fact. The claim was stronger: that the social-psychological adherence to the concept of 'house-as-**home**' tracks working-class values. This might set up working-class home-building as a strategy for anti-capitalist (in relation to finance capitalism) activism. Or, equally perhaps, it would permit anti-capitalist activism to inhabit strategies in defence of the home.

Doubtless, the absorption of surplus space aligns with that of surplus labour. Uber targets those who are low paid and have schedules that include surplus time, like teachers, for example: they can spend it making money driving an Uber taxi. In San Francisco, it's part of the new service economy. Half the city is becoming the servants of the other half, whose wealth is generated by the invention of ever more encompassing ways of being served.

Google's [Ngram Viewer](#), which visualises the history of the prevalence of given words — that's always a conversation-starter. We see the increase in the use of the word 'home' since 1965, and especially since the mid-1990s, and we wonder how much of that is due to an increase in general references to the idea of home as, in recent decades, the experience of home (in any full sense) has become increasingly precarious, versus how much is due to the invention of a single term: 'home page' and its cognates.

Congratulations on your appointment as a curator of the Chicago Architecture Biennial. I look forward to seeing what you do there.

Thanks again, Joseph.

D

PS: 'If data is the new oil then the home is the new Texas.'

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27 November 2014

# To Osvaldo Sanchez

20 July 2014

Oswaldo Sanchez  
Mexico City, Mexico

San Francisco, California  
20 July 2014

Dear Oswaldo,

I'm going to be in DF at the end of next month, and I wanted to ask if we could meet up. Lucía Sanromán told me a bit about the new manifestation of inSite: your Casa Gallina. I'm intrigued by the idea that a biennial — or a recurring, temporary exhibition platform such as inSite has been — would move to take up permanent residence somewhere, indeed permanent residence **elsewhere**. What does it mean for a biennial to reside in a city, or in a particular neighbourhood? And what does it mean for a biennial to move from the city, or cities, with which it's identified (in the case of inSite: San Diego/Tijuana) to another?

Best wishes

D

PS: Thanks to Josh Kun, I now have Sueños de California, Los Tijuana Five's cover version of the Mamas and the Papas, stuck in my head — *mia* California, remember? And the aural border.

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20 July 2014

# To Mike Stubbs

25 February 2015



Mike Stubbs  
Liverpool, UK

San Francisco, USA  
25 February 2015

Hi Mike

Looking back at my notes from **The Resident** last October, it's striking how much the topic of 'spectacle' came up. You, for one, raised it more than a few times.

From the group that you were in with Francesca Bertolotti, Maria Hlavajova, Kevin Hunt and others came these questions: is it still possible to bring together a significant scale of a festival with a degree of criticality? Or similarly, can we create an 'intelligent spectacle with criticality'? Is it possible to reconcile a cathartic 'big moment' with the work of research? And simply: what constitutes a 'spectacle'? For me, both 'spectacle' and 'criticality' are, by now, blunt tools. They're treacherous, too. But I get the sense of the questions.

Questions of scale are tricky too. I remember, years ago (around 2003), talking with a London gallerist about Anish Kapoor's Marsyas, which was installed in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall at that time. He was sceptical. I said, lamely, 'The public likes it.' 'The public is a size queen', he said.

Reading the notes, I see you advocating for the value of spectacle, almost in moral terms. Is that fair to say? That idea is strange to me, but I'm open to it. Where I live, the epitome of art spectacle is Leo Villareal's Bay Lights (2013): 25,000 white LED lights running up and down each cable across the two-mile western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. They're a pretty ornament for a pretty city. They cost \$8 million, but to get spectacular art, typically you need spectacular funding. A further \$4 million has been raised to install them permanently. I don't have a problem with that.

Funny story: the night *Bay Lights* was first turned on, a friend of mine was teaching a class nearby at the San Francisco Art Institute. The class was, by coincidence, scheduled to discuss Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle. So my friend — his name is Frank — marches them, Pied Piper-like, down to Embarcadero, in the light rain, while reading aloud from Debord. As they turn a corner, and the bridge comes into view, and the lights come on, he finds himself reading the lines: *The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.*

You don't need 'cultural theory 101' from me, Mike.

I came across a new use of 'spectacle' (new to me) recently in the writings of Njabulo S. Ndebele (who's now the Dean, I think, at the University of Johannesburg). In the 1980s, during the end game of apartheid, Ndebele produced a series of essays that were collected and published in 1991 under the title Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Ndebele argued that many writers of the struggle era, out of a necessary opposition to the monstrosity of apartheid, had created art of impossible moral clarity, of good versus evil, of grand and simple histories — 'spectacular' art. 'The spectacular documents', he wrote, 'it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issue of society in our minds, obliterating the details; ... it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge.' He called for an alternative; a rediscovery of the ordinary; a sober, unromantic attention to details, to interiority, to the challenge posed by intimate knowledge.

Both the French and South African notions of spectacle put it on the wrong side of a moral divide. What struck me about your comments during the week of **The Resident** was that you gave spectacle something of a **therapeutic** value, a healing value. Specifically, more than once you refer to the **cathartic** power of spectacle. From what I've heard you talk about since, I expect you might have in mind something to do with the experience of military veterans and the collective memory of conflict.

But I sense that, for you, the therapeutic sense of spectacle could extend further.

Thanks.

D

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25 February 2015

# To Rosie Cooper

2 March 2015

Rosie Cooper  
Liverpool, UK

San Francisco, California  
2 March 2015

Hi Rosie

Do you remember I told you about the particular concept of the spectacle that I came across while researching art in South Africa? It's in Njabulo Ndebele's essays collected as Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Well, I wrote to Mike Stubbs about it. You know how, during **The Resident**, he more or less appealed to the Liverpool Biennial not to neglect spectacle. Honestly, I thought it was very interesting to hear him refer to spectacular art as **cathartic**. I wanted to tell him about Ndebele's 'spectacle' because of the explicitly moral terms in which it is articulated: 'spectacle' as moral clarity, 'the ordinary' as moral nuance.

You know more than me about spectacle in public art, and you have tools for thinking about this. What can it mean to call spectacle cathartic? I feel I'd need to know more about trauma, therapy and even psychoanalysis to answer this.

There is a possible link between the spectacle and the spectre, Rosie: the too present and the half absent; what is actually there and what can be remembered. On the same note, perhaps the Granby Streets and the Welsh Streets in Toxteth might not be the right place for an artists' residency, but we could still work with and do something that's appropriate to that space.

See you soon.

D

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2 March 2015

# 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.

D

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# Colophon



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