

# RA PREVIEW

Caroline Smith gives her view on the Liverpool Biennial 2002

## Second coming

Liverpool's second Biennial of international visual art opens this month. The main theme of *International 2002* considers 'the urban environment as a microcosm of the global situation', as well as the human desire to control and the frustrations that arise. Over the last two years, the majority of the 28 commissioned artists, encouraged to enter into dialogue with Liverpool, researched the city's history and engaged with its cultural identity to make the work.

So is it a case of 'Think Global, Act Local'? Integrating internationalism within the gritty, urban landscape is a relatively new model for biennials, one that was broached by Liverpool in its inaugural year in 1999. It received mixed responses. There were, of course, the expected jibes about Merseyside gales, absence of gondola trips and lack of eye-popping pavilions. But serious criticism was levelled at the haphazard situation of the work. The catch-all theme of 'Trace' did little to clarify meaning, not least because the selection of artists fell on the shoulders of one sole curator, Anthony Bond of Sydney's Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Despite these controversial beginnings, the 2002 Biennial received core funding of £1.3 million for its infrastructure and commissions. It shows the confidence from public and private funders to support the Biennial's long-term missions: showcasing cutting-edge works of art, raising Liverpool's profile and placing the event on the art calendar. Lessons have been learnt and there are marked changes. The major difference is the appointment of six 'home-grown' curators to bring in-depth local and cultural knowledge into the selection process.

So who's participating and what can one expect? The artists largely

hail from Europe, USA and South America. The Biennial is staged within three types of location: galleries, public spaces around the city and a schoolhouse. The public spaces largely play host to a series of architectural interventions. For example, Japanese Tatsuro Bashi's *Villa Victoria* is a large, fully-furnished room built bang in the city centre around the Queen Victoria monument. It is open to visitors who can gawp at it from different viewpoints and even pay to spend the night. Similarly unmissable because of its scale is Mexican-Canadian Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installations which equally aim to transform space and interact with the public. Screened on the façade of the Bluecoat Art Centre, passer-bys will see portraits of people from Liverpool projected into their own shadows (below). They can also post text messages from mobile phones which will flood across the building to create a virtual community (or a late night dating game). Night crawlers will experience Jorge Pardo's huge kinetic sculpture outside the club 'Nation'.

The *International* is one of five organised programmes, including *Bloomberg New Contemporaries* and the fringe-styled *Independent*. The Henry Moore Foundation contributes through commissions sited at a disused Victorian schoolhouse in Pleasant Street. There visitors witness American Christine Hill collating a local archive based on interviews with local people. In this space she creates 'a visual document of the world', where she is administrator, accountant and story collector. The office space that she apes is at odds with that of US-based Stephen Powers, Todd James and Barry McGee whose works subvert mass capitalism by producing cartoons, graffiti art and animation on the school's frontage and in the yard. Visitors are also encouraged

to go into a contemplative reading room, a collaborative project between Rémy Markowitsch and Michael Lin. Markowitsch has recorded on video snippets of Daniel Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe* read out by members of the British public, while Lin's floor paintings suggest the dualities between Asian and Western culture.

At Tate Liverpool and the Bluecoat Art Centre, the works address global media, consumerist trappings and cultural difference. Witness Melbourne-based Patricia Piccinini's fibreglass car objects which address seduction and consumption. Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi's pop cultural placards (right) explore celebrity obsession, blurring fact and fiction. A number of artists explore the consequences of globalisation and social behaviour. Mexican artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performances break down cultural divisions by casting himself as a series of hybrid identities. His two-day performance, *Ex-Centris*, sees him and a team of international actors stationed as 'inter-cultural specimens' in an interactive, living natural history museum, creating a 'freak show'. Visitors thus confront their own attitudes towards other cultures and ethnographic representation in the global media.

Certainly the curatorial framework sets up some interesting ideas. But what does 'international' actually mean here? A term serving as a fashionable brand – one that strains under the multiple agendas of curators and artists' identities – to disguise what is essentially a big, media-savvy art show? Or will dialogues between the site-specific art and gallery works create the intended resonance over the next ten weeks? Only time will tell.

*The Liverpool Biennial opens 14 September through to 24 November; visit [www.biennial.org.uk](http://www.biennial.org.uk).*



Left, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's large-scale video projection in Liverpool's city centre repeats a similar work shown in Rotterdam last year.