

# Liverpool Biennial review – litterbugs, light shows and left luggage

Adrian Searle

Designed by committee, this year's biennial can feel cluttered and overwhelming. But it's worth fighting to find the good stuff amid the piles of rubbish.



*Memorial to an abandoned community ... Lara Favaretto's Momentary Monument: The Stone (2016) in Rhiwlas Street, Toxteth, Liverpool. Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian*

Was there ever a biennial or a triennial, a Manifesta, Documenta or any other big art shindig that made total sense, whose art was at perfect pitch, whose catalogue was a joy, the theme transparent?

Stupid question. There's rubbish everywhere in the latest Liverpool Biennial; strewn about the floor, swept into corners, accumulated at the foot of pillars and left on windowsills. Old tissues, nasal sprays, bits of packaging, beer cans, fag-ends, soiled receipts and shopping lists for the chemist and forgotten dinners – you name it. Someone said they found a \$5 bill on the floor of Tate Liverpool. It's probably worth about 50 quid by now.

Jason Dodge, an artist from Philadelphia, is the litterbug, and he has strewn the tides of stuff just about everywhere. Dodge has been accumulating all this detritus for years, and calls his annoying intervention What the Living Do. He should come round my flat some time. I'll show him what I do.

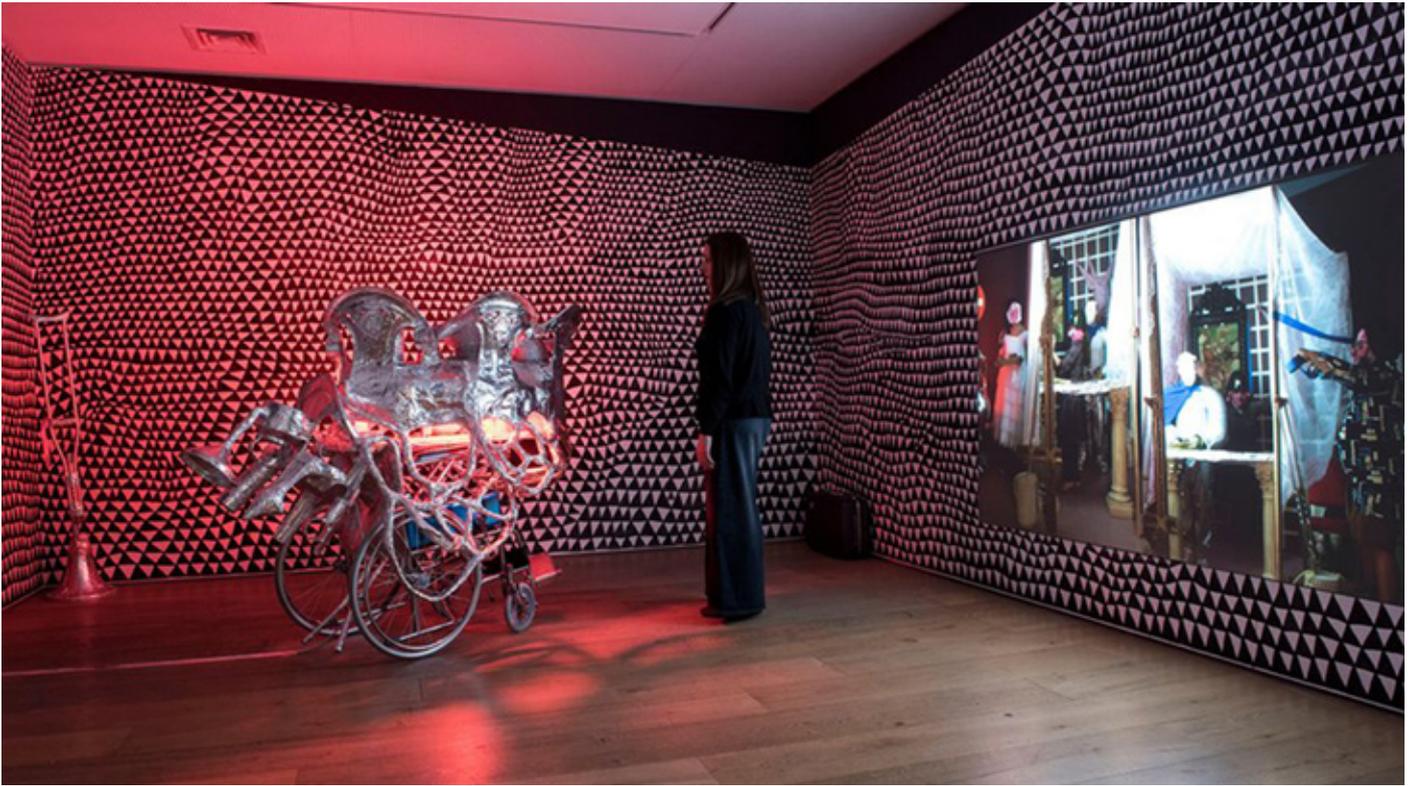


*Ancient Greece at Tate Liverpool, as part of the ninth Liverpool Biennial. Photograph: Roger Sinek*

At Tate Liverpool, the rubbish drifts under the bits of Greek statuary, another kind of historical litter of knees, arms, heads, decorated pots, pert arses and partial bodies, many of which were collected by the 19th-century Lancashire industrialist Henry Blundell. They now reside in Liverpool museums. Many of Blundell's amassed fragments were idiotically "restored", melding objects of different eras and sexes, which is fun, but a kind of vandalism. These fragments sit and stand about on odd, virulently pink, tubular metal prosthetic crutches and armatures, or on tabletops supported by the same garish structures, all made by Belgian artist Koenraad Dedobbeleer.

In a nearby corner Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian present a scratch video of footage showing Isis fanatics destroying monuments and smashing classical sculptures and statuary. You almost can't look, but at least it is only art – the trio have drawn over the footage with lumpen cartoon additions that turn the whole thing into clownish, bestial farce. There is glee in the destructive urge. It is almost infectious.

This is the best and most dangerous work by the Iranian trio, who are altogether too omnipresent here. Now living in exile in Dubai, they sent all their work (as well as pieces from their collection, including photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, Mona Hatoum and Helen Chadwick) to Liverpool in a shipping container, and their sculptures and videos spread from Tate to the Open Eye gallery and to the big, abandoned bottling-plant hangar of Cains Brewery. I tire of all the makeshift figures and props which reappear in their videos, the pig-headed androgynes in wedding dresses, the spacemen in duct-tubing costumes wielding trombone-cum-orthopaedic crutch things, the cabbages and rubber gloves, the too-much-already of it all. After a bit you stop being surprised and feel swamped instead.



*An installation by Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian at Open Eye Gallery. Photograph: Joel Fildes*

Parallel and overlapping themes and conceits dog the latest Liverpool Biennial. You could get lost unpicking them. This may be the point. Rather than a single curator, the current biennial has a “curatorial faculty”, which makes the whole thing sound like an academic symposium. A brainstorming exercise run amok, the biennial’s themes are played out through a series of entangled episodes and heavily flagged curatorial rubrics, including Monuments from the Future, Flashbacks, Ancient Greece, Children’s Episodes, Software, and Chinatown. In the midst of it all is a man walking forwards through traffic that’s driving in reverse.

This last is not a metaphor but one of a number of small, enigmatic films by the Malawian artist Samson Kambalu, shown both at Tate Liverpool and in the magnificent wreck of the ABC cinema. Kambalu judders on the screen, goes against the flow of the world at the street crossing, becomes a back-to-front flaneur.

Another of his films appears to be no more than a still of a small boy, low in his seat, an audience of one in an empty cinema, transfixed by the light on the screen, gleaming in his eye. I cannot tell you why Kambalu’s seemingly inconsequential little videos fix themselves so memorably in the mind. If only the rest of the biennial were so strong, and shown in a less cluttered way.

Showing the same artists in multiple venues does give the show a kind of continuity, but also makes it enervating. Oh no, you say, not this again. You have to fight to find the good stuff. On one of the boarded-up, ruined terraces in Toxteth stands a great block of granite. Rather than a mute lump of minimalism dumped in a deprived area, it stands between the houses as a monument to nothing, or a memorial to an abandoned community. You could read it as a gravestone, or a mark of resistance.



*Rita McBride's laser installation Portal (2016) ... 'the nearest we get to spectacle in the whole biennial.'* Photograph: Joel Fildes

Lara Favaretto's *Momentary Monument - The Stone* has a narrow slit cut into the hidden void inside. It functions as an unmarked donation box, where visitors can leave money and messages. At the close of the biennial, the big cubic stone will be destroyed, and whatever funds have been deposited will be donated to Asylum Link Merseyside, a charity working with asylum-seekers and refugees.

Favaretto has also purchased items of unclaimed luggage from left-luggage deposits, adding new stuff to the contents before locking them and throwing away the key. Her *Lost and Found* pieces dot the biennial's venues. Nowadays, there is always an air of threat about an abandoned suitcase, and worry – all kinds of worries – about their absent owner.

A short walk away, between the arches in the dank, drained, covered Toxteth reservoir, green lasers blitz the damp air, the electric green light bedewed like a spider's web on an autumn morning. As dangerous as it is beguiling, the light describes a mathematical model between the arches of the subterranean vault. This is the nearest we get to unalloyed spectacle in the whole biennial. Even if you only stay a few minutes, Rita McBride's installation it is worth the journey.

In the Oratory beside the Anglican cathedral, Lawrence Abu Hamdan screens a film set in a shooting gallery. This is apt. The film is a record of a trial over the shooting of Palestinians on the West Bank, and Hamdan, an audio analyst, discovered that the shots that killed the boys were not, as the defence suggested, accidental deaths by rubber bullets but the result of live ammunition.



Back to the future ... a still from *Dream English Kid* by Mark Leckey Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Cabinet London

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The building where Mark Leckey was due to screen his new video *Dream English Kid* was destroyed by arson shortly before the biennial opened. Now relocated, Leckey's work is a journey into his own past, and has at its centre found amateur footage of a Liverpool gig by Joy Division, which the young Leckey attended. *Dream English Kid* takes us to a Liverpool destroyed by Thatcherism, with scenes of disaffected youth, wastelands, motorway bridges and pylons, and piss running down a man's trousers.

Brilliantly edited and filled with a kind of ambivalent anti-nostalgia, it is by turns moving, funny, ribald and stomach-churning. The sound is infectious and convulsive. Watching, I feel it is also prophetic, as though we were, like Samson Kambalu, walking backwards into a miserable, destitute future.

I last encountered the provocateur Michael Portnoy when I took part in an absurd live gameshow he hosted at Documenta 12. Portnoy's Relational Stalinism: The Musical at the Black-E is a stunning performance, as much theatre and parlour game as art. I never thought choreographed blinking or thumb-waggling could be so absurdly, pathetically affecting and hilarious. There are routines that parody choreographer Yvonne Rainer and take down Tino Sehgal, Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe's collective Ann-Lee avatar, turning the homeless manga figure into a dysfunctional, resentful robot.

Audience members who weren't paying due attention to Portnoy's bizarre language games got thrown out, and performers were humiliated by impossible demands. He seems to have a troubled, complicated relationship to art, other artists, the art world and the audience. This is healthy. It is cathartic. This is what we really need, not a faculty of curators.

*Liverpool Biennial is at venues across the city until 16 October. Guardian Members are invited to an exclusive private view at Open Eye Gallery on 21 July.*