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Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach and the Port (Part I)

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Cover image: **Fig. 3** Installation view of *Pan African Flag for the Relic Travellers' Alliance*, by Larry Achiampong at The Cunard Building, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Mark McNulty).

Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach and the Port (Part I)

by Lauren Velvick • 14.05.2021

Liverpool Biennial 2021 was the first major British art festival to launch after pandemic-related postponements, and yet it was still too early for the planned reopening of galleries and museums in May. The Biennial usually spans the city's established cultural venues, pre-development or semi-derelict sites and outdoor public spaces. Now unable to build a programme around the celebratory nodes of launches and gatherings, this year's festival has been a diffuse experience. The outdoor works and indoor exhibitions are branded as two 'chapters', with a digital programme of talks and discussions ongoing throughout. This is presumably an incorporation of circumstances beyond the team's control more than a curatorial decision, but it is nonetheless in keeping with the festival's conceptual framework: foregrounding different entry points and subjective, embodied experience.

Three designated 'points of entry' are listed on the Biennial website: 'The Stomach', 'Porosity' and 'Kinship'. However, in approaching the 'outside chapter' on foot these seem to exist only as communiqués written by the Brooklyn-based curator Sarah Demeuse; it is unclear how these texts interact with or influence the wider programme, especially as there is a host of other exploratory, and explanatory, material available. The curator of this iteration, Manuela Moscoso, set out to use Liverpool's port-city porosity to foreground the body as a permeable and fluid site of knowledge and understanding. With the necessary postponements, some aspects of this curatorial conceit will land with clarity, while others may drift.

Although the Biennial's commissions were likely underway before the pandemic escalated in the United Kingdom, many are poignant in the current context. The seeming granularity of the expanded programme congeals into points of convergence, as conversations and references from one aspect are brought to bear on others. In contrast to the 2018 edition, *Beautiful world, where are you?*, which referred to 'a world in social, political and economic turmoil' – albeit at an observational and inquiring remove – *The Stomach and The Port* explicitly draws on non-Western ways of thinking of the individual body. This context encourages reflection on our habitual grasping for a linear route – especially from one aspect of the programme to another – when instead, there are only 'points of entry' given.

Despite the current lack of sociality or spectacle of online events, this does not detract from their function as scaffolding for the core programme of commissions. Before visiting Liverpool, the present reviewer attended an online conversation between Ayesha Hameed and the anthropologist Stefan Helmreich. Hameed's work will be on show at the Lush Building in central Liverpool as part of the 'second chapter'. During the event, Helmreich referred to *Black Atlantis* (2016), Hameed's audio-visual essay in which she connects contemporary climate change and its impact with the afterlives of the Black Atlantic. Witnessing the conversation in this format – at home, removed from the festival itself – it was possible to draw together references in the moment; when Hameed spoke of comfort in immersion and her fragmentary approach to research, it found alignment with the experience and consumption of the programme as a whole.

The first 'outside' chapter of the Biennial comprises seven public artist commissions. Situated at the cobbled Canning Dock Quayside, Rashid Johnson's sculpture *Stacked Heads* [FIG.1](#) is positioned amidst shipping debris-turned-monuments, its black patina surface mirroring the objects surrounding it. Based on the artist's series of drawings *Anxious Men* (2015–ongoing), which is characterised by faces scratched into a pictorial surface in a process of drawing through erasure, the materials and references in Johnson's sculpture point to the past year's well-documented struggles, both personal and collective. Succulents and yuccas, which weave through the square-like heads, struggle to survive in their new environment despite being 'selected for their resilience'. Teresa Solar's *Osteoclast (I do not know how I came to be on board this ship, this navel of my ark)* [FIG.2](#) is situated in the square at Exchange Flags, between the outdoor drinking and dining areas of surrounding restaurants and the 1813 Nelson Monument. Composed of five bright red kayaks mounted on trestle-like legs, each piece reflects the shape of a human bone. As such, the work directly mirrors the bodily framework of the wider festival in 'drawing a parallel between bones and vessels'.

When looking up, one of Larry Achiampong's *Pan African Flag For the Relic Travellers' Alliance* [FIG.3](#) is often in sight, positioned atop Liverpool's grand dockside buildings and throughout the city centre [FIG.4](#). At the time of writing, the exact sites of these works are still listed as 'TBC', so there is an element of luck in how many can be discovered. As an intervention, the flags series engenders a consideration of the ubiquitous national symbolism that has recently been both staunchly challenged and recapitulated in the UK. The flags' designs represent the fifty-four countries of Africa and feature symbolic imagery that seeks to evoke 'solidarity and collective empathy'. An ongoing series, here it speaks to Liverpool's historic connections to West Africa through the slave trade. The colours – green, black and red – are a reference to Pan African symbolism and the iconography suggests community,

motion and the human figure in ascension, although often seen at a distance, folded or in movement.

Another work that mirrors the visual language of its site is Linder's *Bower of Bliss* FIG.5, which is positioned on a wall in the Liverpool ONE shopping centre. Whereas Achiampong's flags create a striking juxtaposition, Linder's glossy montage mural, situated in a world of glossy montage adverts, does not necessarily achieve the aims stated in its title: of linking this privatised site of consumption with the 'bower of bliss', a safe, deeply pleasurable space. In addition, due to its placement, it is difficult to physically situate oneself as an observer of the work: one is caught between standing awkwardly in the middle of walkways or perching on railings. The ideal way to experience these works is likely as a resident. Encountered as a backdrop to the mundanities and minutiae of the everyday, the ideas present in this year's festival – of challenging the conceptual and physical relationship between the body and exhibited work – can be more readily considered and metabolised.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Stacked Heads*, by Rashid Johnson at Canning Dock Quayside, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Mark McNulty).

This is also true of the two works that are unfortunately difficult to locate in situ: Daniel Steegmann Mangrané's *La Pensée Férale* FIG.6 FIG.7 and Erick Beltrán's *Superposition* FIG.8. Steegmann Mangrané's tree trunk sculpture is situated in Crown Street Park, a mile or so out of the city centre, meaning that visitors are ultimately looking for a tree in a park. Beltrán's work, on the other hand, is an audio installation presented across a fleet of Liverpool's ComCab taxis, but when the present reviewer quoted Liverpool Biennial to the operator as directed by festival guides, they were

confused and unable to assist.

Missing one or two works, or having to catch up later online is typical of our current era of readjustments and adaptations. Listening to the sound elements of Beltrán's work online, it is interesting to consider how approaching the programme in this way – interspersed with everyday life, instead of a festival with the attendant connotations of a time out of time – has altered its impact. With venues and cultural organisations striving, but not always succeeding, to provide a smooth experience in extremely uncertain and changeable conditions, it can be difficult to recalibrate from the simple enjoyment of being outside towards critique.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Osteoclast*, by Teresa Solar at Exchange Flags, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Colin McPherson).



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Pan African Flag for the Relic Travellers' Alliance* by Larry Achiampong at The Cunard Building, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Mark McNulty).



Fig. 4 Installation view of *Pan African Flag for the Relic Travellers' Alliance*, by Larry Achiampong at Central Library, Picton Reading Room Dome, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021 (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Bower of Bliss*, by Linder at Liverpool ONE, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Mark McNulty).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *La Pensée Férale*, by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané at Crown Street Park, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *La Pensée Férale*, by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané at Crown Street Park, Liverpool, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photograph Rob Battersby).



Fig. 8 Installation View of *Superposition*, by Erick Beltrán, Liverpool Biennial 2021. (Photography Rob Battersby).

Exhibition details

Liverpool Biennial 2021: The Stomach at
The Port (Chapter One)
20th March–6th June
Online and locations across Liverpool

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