AVON CALLING

Spike Island Journal 3
edited by Eddie Chambers

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Simon Edwards, 1979

Thank you to Lucy Byatt, all of the staff of Spike Island, and all of the members of the Spike Island Interpretation Group 2 for their work in facilitating and hosting my residency and for assisting in the production of this Journal. From the Spike Island Interpretation Group 2, particular thanks are extended to Julian Claxton, Karen Di Franco, Toby Huddlestone, Winnie Love, Lady Lucy, Laura Mansfield and Lizi Sanchez. And thank you to Karen, Laura and Lizi, and to Richard Hylton and Kwong Lee, for contributing such provocative and illuminating texts for this publication.

Thank you to Jane Connarty for help with editing this Journal.

Eddie Chambers July 2006

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Spike Island

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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Bristol, this is Bristol

This publication has come about as a result of my tenure as Writer-in-Residence, working with a number of individuals from the Spike Island Interpretation Group 2, plus several writers from beyond Bristol. This issue of the Journal attempts to critically assess aspects of the position of visual art and artists in Bristol. As such, this particular Journal is very much grounded in Bristol experiences, perspectives and opinions (though these are supplemented with a range of perspectives from several writers based in other cities). All of us involved in the production of this Journal hope that the publication will offer fresh and critical perspectives on the ways in which a city such as Bristol deals with, and responds to, contemporary art and artists.

In order for a city to enjoy a well-founded reputation as a dynamic centre of contemporary visual arts activity, that city must, in my view, have a sustainable infrastructure that utilises and benefits a wide range of the artists living and working in it. In this respect, the development of Spike Island is obviously a significant boost to Bristol's visual arts profile and its aspirations to be a major centre of the arts. Likewise, initiatives such as Station are similarly important.

But without further substantial and sustained investment, it is unlikely that we can make any confident assumptions about the long-term health of the visual arts in Bristol. The recent opening of a bigger, shinier and even more prestigious Arnolfini complicates the situation. It is not yet clear that any of the brightest and best of Bristol's artists will figure in the Arnolfini's forthcoming curatorial programme. Arnolfini represents fabulous levels of visual arts expenditure, both in its capital development and in its ongoing running costs, though as mentioned, it's not yet clear if any of this expenditure will directly benefit any of the city's artists.

Discussions on these matters with members of the Spike Island Interpretation Group 2 led me to want to further explore debates about the nature of arts provision in Bristol, the nature, scope, viability and longevity of local independent initiatives, and how such things impact on the profile of artists within the city. To this end, I've commissioned a number of texts that seek to look critically at aspects of the arts infrastructure in Bristol, in relation to the fortunes and profile of the city's artists. It is perhaps

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fortuitous that the British Art Show is coming to Bristol in the summer of 2006, as the arrival of this bells and whistles road show throws into sharp focus the decidedly mixed fortunes of Bristol's artists. Several of the following texts consider the British Art Show and what its arrival here might mean to/for Bristol artists and Bristol audiences. Something calling itself the 'British Art Show' arguably carries with it the implication that what is being presented is somehow reflective of art practice across Britain. But if previous British Art Shows are anything to go by, what we will be treated to amounts to a decidedly parochial selection of London-based artists. It's difficult to argue with Richard Hylton's damning description of the British Art Show 4 as "in effect a 'yBa' moment dressed up as a representation of 'British Art'." It is in some ways curious that an exhibition having such a limited and narrow outlook and scope is apparently widely welcomed with open arms and taken to be a credible barometer of the best of the nation's art practice.

Relatively few artists, practising beyond London, get to be in the British Art Show [See Karen Di Franco's pie charts, elsewhere in this publication]. Questions flow from this, and to this end, a number of the following texts critique this curious thing called the British Art Show. (Why) does Bristol need this jamboree? Does Bristol in fact want this exhibition? Whose opinions influenced the decision to bring the exhibition to Bristol? These may well be unanswerable questions, but it seems to me to be vitally important to interrogate the assumptions that lie behind the mounting of such an exhibition in Bristol, particularly as the British Art Show is being hosted by several major venues that have yet to take any serious and sustained interest in the contemporary art produced by Bristol's practitioners. Should galleries in Bristol be more than holding bays for London art? Should we be thankful to be included in the tour of such an apparently prestigious exhibition? Or is it simply the case that by implication, the 'best' art is that which comes out of London and as such, inevitably demands our respect and requires our attention? This may well be the case, but as Laura Mansfield points out in her text, Bristol "has a very critical, knowledgeable and self-conscious arts community, a community located significantly less than two hours' travel time from central London." We are never short of opportunities to see art in London's galleries and the capital's art magazines and the art pages of the national newspapers rarely, it seems, write about anything happening beyond London. In this sense, the British Art Show is often, at best, a generally *familiar* selection. Karen Di Franco makes a pointed observation about this familiarity when she writes "Given the themes that have been emphasised by the curators are already familiar and established to a well-versed art going crowd, it is difficult to see precisely where expected interest in the British Art Show lies."

If none of Bristol's artists are represented in the British Art Show, does this absence carry any sort of implication or consequence? It is fascinating to read Richard Hylton and Kwong Lee's texts, that both touch on the arrival of the British Art Show in Manchester a decade ago, and the ways

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in which Manchester's artists, smarting from their wholesale exclusion from the exhibition, went on to mount responses that formed the basis of that city's current reputation as a dynamic centre of contemporary visual art activity.

With deference to Laura, I'll quote one of the closing paragraphs of my text, written for her Berlin Bristol London Skopje (Spike Island Journal 2) publication:

"All of this raises important questions about the roles of major or dominant institutions within a city such as Bristol. I might not like it, but perhaps it is indeed the role of a major institution to look beyond that which is under its nose. Perhaps this is what audiences want - stuff that is brought in from elsewhere. Perhaps it is far more beneficial for local artists to be left alone to do their own thing and to struggle for their own visibility. Perhaps it is after all appropriate that there are tiers and hierarchies of activity. In recent years it is the younger artists of the city's studios who have been responsible for a number of [new and interesting] initiatives. Perhaps this indicates an organisational agility as well as an ability of like-minded artists to get things done. On the other hand, without substantial investment and long-term funding, it's difficult to imagine how any local initiative can truly develop reach and depth. One other question: should it be left to a city's artists' studios to be responsible to any degree for the fortunes and profiles of local artists?"

Further questions flow from these questions. As Lizi Sanchez states "Art practice in Bristol, like in many other small cities, relies more on artist-led initiatives than on the market…" She goes on to ask, pointedly, "But where does all this potential go when landmark institutions have no special interest in engaging with artists working in the locality; when the artists within reach are understood by local government as little more than instruments of city regeneration; and when public funding is mainly given to encourage 'educational or socially engaged' artistic practices?" Such questions reflect concerns that exercise not only the writers whose texts appear in the following pages, but also exercise wider constituencies of Bristol's practitioners.

I'll leave the last word to Kwong Lee, whose candid discussions of the fortunes of Manchester's artists contain much that is relevant and important to us, here in Bristol. "A city that undermines or tries to exploit its artist-led layer fosters an insular reputation, which in turn stifles its own cultural aspirations. Conversely in supporting diversity - the initiatives and symbiotic relationships that are present - a city encourages a dynamism that retains its artists, builds its audience and draws positive attention from outside of the area. Those in positions of influence - be that in the local government, the arts funding system, or senior curatorial posts - must possess leadership and generosity, vision and flexibility to have a chance for an organic and rooted visual arts culture to develop and thrive."

Directions for Use

Now in its sixth entity the British Art Show will be visiting Bristol in July 2006. This particular British Art Show has received, in comparison to its predecessors, markedly favourable reviews and has even been considered: "The most inclusive and diverse in the survey exhibition's 26 year history" [i]

By using information provided by Hayward Touring Exhibitions, these notes have been conceived as a guide to the selection and execution of a British Art Show.

Directions for Use

Section A: Selection

By employing the skills of freelance/independent curators, an air of impartiality is lent to the selection process and gives a degree of separation from the organising institution.

i) The rise of the unaffiliated curator is now an integral part of the contemporary art world. Since the inception of the Curating Contemporary Art MA at the Royal College of Art in 1992, and the subsequent development of a similar course at Goldsmiths College, a fresh group of trained curators are released every year, with career ambitions to eventually tackle exhibitions such as the British Art Show.

ii) The relationship occurring between selectors and the survey show is awkward, as the desire to engender criteria for the theoretical underpinnings of a show such as this will always make certain modes of production more favourable, especially if an agenda is already in place before selection commences.

iii) Implementation of sub section (ii) is reliant on the curators' ability to ignore problems highlighted by previous shows.

"There is no open submission invited for the 'British Art Show' and no systemised procedure of selection. However, our perception of the exhibition is inevitably conditioned by its framing within some of the conventions of the open exhibition" [ii]

iv) Once the final selection has been made, the curators can use the catalogue introduction, essays and statements to justify their decisions.

"The internationalism of our selection of both artists and works goes some way to address the apparent anachronism of the national survey show, particularly since we felt we were never consciously making internationalism a selection criterion" [iii]

Yet 'internationalism' is continuously returned to throughout the catalogue text, surely confirming its influence over selection. This is not a particularly contemporary observation, as Stuart Morgan confirmed in 1990, commenting on British Art Show 3 "it has shown us what we all knew before... that 'British' means not only white but also black, yellow and brown and that 'Britain' means not only London" [iv]

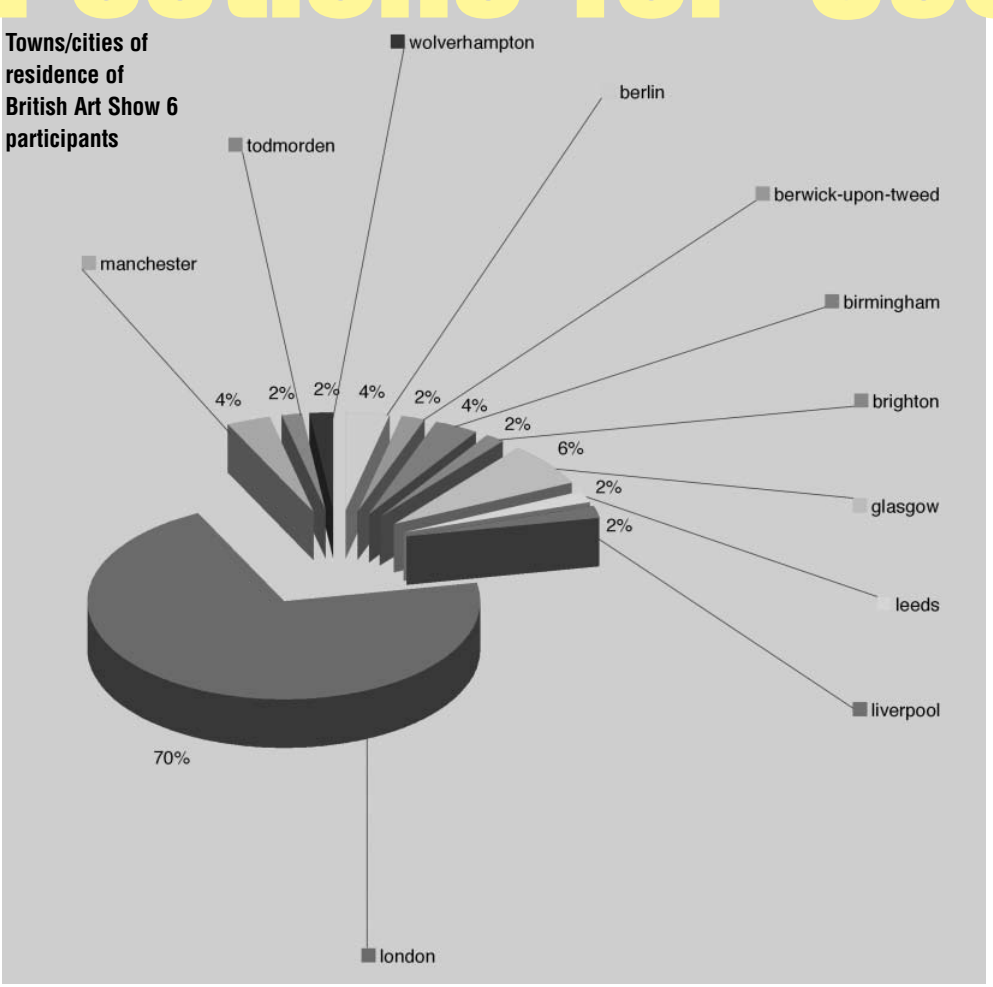
nb) This also provides the opportunity to deny the packaged exhibition as a survey show, despite the inherent inevitability of it being designated as such.

"Of course, on some level the British Art Show is unavoidably a survey exhibition of sorts, and selection is integral to establishing the formation of curatorial discourse" [iv]

Section B: Thematics/Interpretation

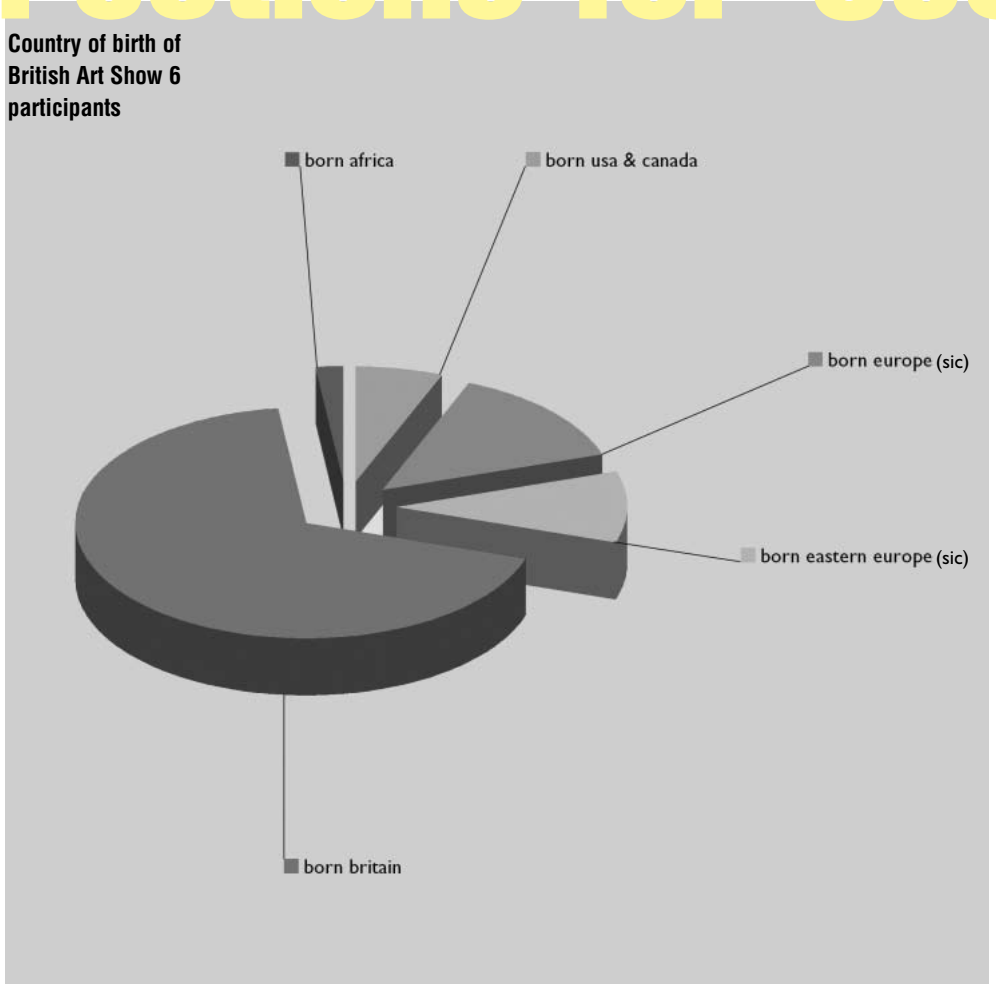
i) Do not allow for errant interpretation of selected work. To ensure this, group art works under broad

Directions for Use



Directions for Use

Country of birth of British Art Show 6 participants



Directions for Use

subject headings that can then be discussed (at length) by the selectors, in the catalogue.

"The most memorable biennials have had strong thematic and conceptual identities; they have advanced arguments, sometimes provocative ones and tried to make sense of shifting cultural and political landscapes". [v]

As the selected works are symptomatic of the main themes outlined within the catalogue, there is little to suggest that any of the artworks actually take any of these themes or cultural observations as direct points of departure or enquiry. i.e. Internationalism is a theme or a strand identified by the curators, but not necessarily one that is dealt with directly by the participating artists

ii) As a gesture, publish discussions between the curators and a small selection of participating artists that fit into the designated groupings. This will allude to a relationship between the artists and curators that will serve to further enhance their curatorial identity over the work presented.

"That means that typical strategies of artistic work have now shifted to a metalevel or been transformed (if one is inclined to view the curator, who stands between the institution and the artist, as a metalevel of artistic work in the institutional field)" [vi]

iii) Use the catalogue to make rhetorical statements that refer to the politicisation of the art works presented and allude to the ideas of 'institutional critique'. This will perhaps divert attention away from how this exhibition does not sustain artistic practice, (only celebrates it) and is conventional in its organisation.

Section C: Launch

i) To ensure maximum impact, make sure the venue that will launch the tour is the most spectacular (if possible find a place that has been rejuvenated by lottery funding - see Baltic). Attempt to ensure that the exhibition is housed on one site as it will prove difficult to entice critics to visit multiple sites.

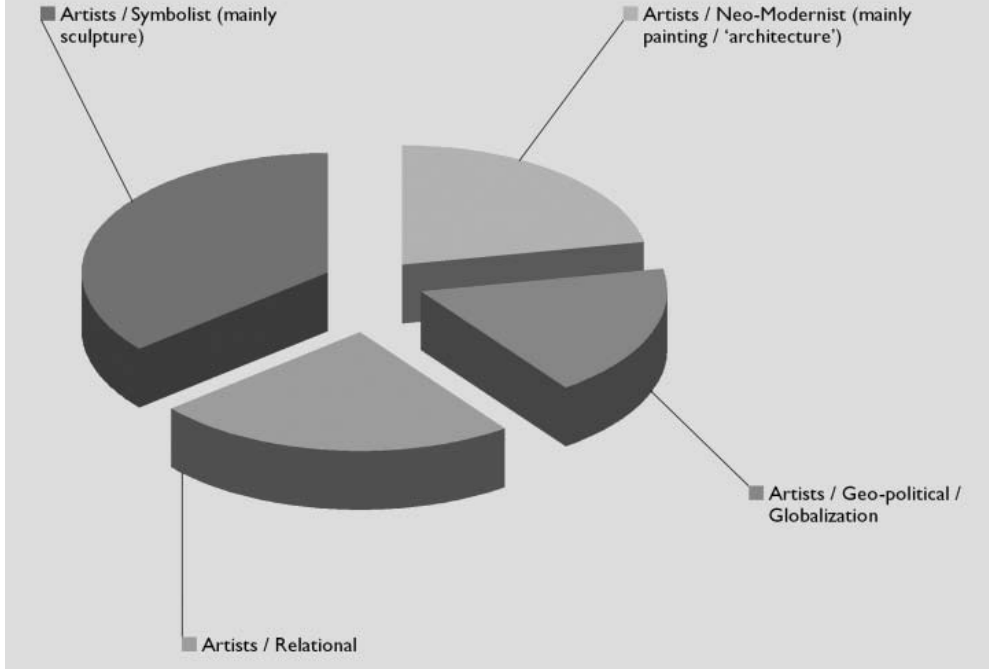
nb) It is unlikely that national or international critics will visit the exhibition after the initial launch, thereby alleviating pressure to adhere to any statements around programming that may have been made in the catalogue.

Section D: Host Cities

i) The organisational structure of this exhibition necessitates a tour to the regions, making it easier to impose the cultural values highlighted within this package on the public.

ii) This exhibition will take up most (if not all) art spaces within the host cities; this will mean that local artists will only be able to assert their own cultural autonomy with 'fringe' events.

Thematic groupings of British Art Show 6 participants



iii) Despite the lack of available art spaces within these cities, nevertheless encourage local artists to organise events that coincide with the tour. The public will see this as a collaborative response regardless as to whether or not there has actually been any dialogue

Section E: Audience

Who is the intended audience? Given the themes that have been emphasised by the curators are already familiar and established to a well-versed art going crowd, it is difficult to see precisely where expected interest in the British Art Show lies.

The extent to which the selectors have had to explain their choices is symptomatic of the difficulty of meeting so many of the expectations and criteria that such an exhibition entails. With such a task in hand and so many boxes to tick, it becomes apparent that exhibitions that encapsulate issues raised by the British Art Show happen quite spontaneously without the feeling that art has been selected to fulfil criteria.

By attempting to draw affinities with international biennales, the curators, inadvertently perhaps, prompt the question of what makes the British Art Show unique enough to warrant its title or the effort taken to stage it.

i Neil Mulholland 'British Art Show 6' Flash Art Jan/Feb 2006 p.100

ii David Briers 'All that glitters is Goldsmiths' A-N Magazine Feb 1996

iii Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker Introduction BAS6 catalogue p.12

iv Stuart Morgan 'Complaints Department' Artscribe May 1990

v Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker Introduction BAS6 catalogue p.13

vi ibid.

vii Hans Dieter Huber 'Artists as curators - curators as artists?' www.hgb-leipzig.de/ARTNINE/huber/writings/curators.html

Give us a show

In November 1995, the British Art Show 4 opened in Manchester. This was to be the first time that the city hosted the exhibition. Anticipating its arrival, two Manchester-based artists (Martin Vincent and Nick Crowe) decided to organise and curate an exhibition that would celebrate "the vitality and inventiveness of art in Manchester today."[ii] The resulting exhibition Ha! (top floor 10a Peter Street, Manchester 12 November - 22 December 1995) involved nine Manchester-based artists and was presented in a then soon-to-be-converted warehouse reputedly owned by a music impresario Tony Wilson. The choice of venue, though fortuitous, was significant for two reasons. Not only was the warehouse free to use, but it was also located in close proximity to Upper Campfield Market, Castlefield, one of the main city centre venues used for the British Art Show.

The rationale behind Ha! was simple enough: "focusing on installation and lens based work - marking an abrupt departure from the painterly traditions with which Manchester's art scene is normally associated." [iii] Furthermore, with the arrival of the British Art Show came a heightened sense that the local and national media spotlight would be on Manchester, albeit temporarily. For Ha!'s curators, this would be an ideal opportunity for artists based in the city to draw attention to what was happening in areas of Manchester's artistic community. Vincent and Crowe would attempt to exploit this media/art frenzy by unashamedly riding on the coat tails of the British Art Show, not only encouraging some artists to participate in their project, but also hoping to entice visitors to the British Art Show to go on to see work by Manchester-based artists.

During this time, I was working at Oldham Art Gallery, but had had a tangential involvement with some Manchester-based artists.[iv] There were other reasons (besides capitalising on the arrival of a major exhibition in Manchester) as to why Vincent and Crowe came to organise Ha! In 1995, the British Art Show's arrival in

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Manchester reflected not only the aspirations of local major galleries (Cornerhouse and Whitworth Art Gallery et al.) but also possibly a reward for their endeavours in the form of recognition from London's Hayward Gallery (organisers of the show) that Manchester was indeed a place worthy of hosting such an exhibition. Manchester had developed a reputation for the visual arts, though back then, it was a reputation that had little or nothing to do with artists based in the city. Manchester-based artists did not appear to get much opportunity in the city's major spaces and for the most part, these artists were ignored. Their marginalisation was institutionalised with the obligatory 'open studios' or the occasional 'open submission' exhibition, and other low budget arts events. Although the majority of artists may have been hungry for recognition and exposure, these were the only kinds of opportunities they were expected to feed on.

The arrival of the British Art Show (with a selection that was essentially fixated on a London/Glasgow axis of commercially signed artists) appeared to reinforce the marginalised status of Manchester-based practitioners. Not only did local artists have to accept the perennial contempt in which they were held by their local galleries, they were now to be further humiliated by the arrival of the British Art Show which was in effect a 'yBa' moment dressed up as a representation of 'British Art'.

In this context, Manchester artists had more than enough reasons to feel aggrieved by the arrival of the British Art Show. However, simply complaining was not going to help. Ha! became an opportunity for some to show that they were not content with the situation in which an imported British Art Show did not reflect or include any of them. Such sentiments managed to cause a minor media skirmish. Shortly before the launch of both the British Art Show and Ha!, an exhibition curator from the Hayward was interviewed on local BBC television and sought to deny the mild accusations against the British Art Show of its exclusion of artists from the region.

When it came to pulling in visitors, a low budget exhibition such as Ha! could never compete with the institutional and financial muscle of the British Art Show. I recall playing with Die Kunst (see footnote iv) at the Ha! exhibition and, save for the loyal artistic fraternity, I don't recall the notable presence of any 'visitors'. Ha! did however mark a turning point in Manchester's art scene, one that through the late 1990s no longer simply relied on or yearned for (if indeed it ever did) recognition from the city's major art institutions.

Artist-led spaces and organisations such as The Annual Programme, Bono & Sting, and Work & Leisure International began to emerge. Embracing and competing with each other (as well as seeking and attracting established artists and recent art graduates working in the region and further afield) these initiatives functioned on comparatively paltry to non-existent budgets, but

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nevertheless managed to stage a wide range of exhibitions in artists' homes, galleries, bars and public spaces. Although this activity may not have always been of the highest quality, and at times may have lacked organisation and was often formed around cliques, there was, even so, a certain vibrancy to it that arguably contributed to transforming the perception of artists in the North West region. Most significantly, these initiatives did what the major institutions of Manchester frequently failed to do. That is, marry the 'local' with the 'national' and 'international'.

Ten years on, in 2006, the British Art Show again made its way to Manchester. This summer it will arrive in Bristol for the first time since its inaugural tour during 1979-80. Although I have never lived in Bristol and do not claim to have an intimate knowledge of its arts environment, over the past fifteen years or so I have been a regular visitor. There are some interesting parallels between Manchester and Bristol relating to dynamics between the provision for local and national artistic activity. Both cities are awash with practicing artists. Both cities have galleries/organisations that are generously supported by public funding. Like Manchester of the mid 1990s, there is little evidence to suggest that any of the major arts related institutions in Bristol have that much interest in or time for the artists living on their doorstep.

Given the attention that the British Art Show commands, it is not surprising that organisations such as Arnolfini and Spike Island (along with the likes of artist-led organisations such as ROOM and Station) eagerly await its arrival. It is however intriguing to consider how and why Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and the Royal West of England Academy have also fallen into line to welcome the British Art Show. Although the latter venue did host the exhibition in 1980, neither institution could be described as either making a generous contribution to contemporary visual arts in Bristol or, regularly supporting the contemporary visual artists of Bristol. Therefore, why have these institutions suddenly become interested in contemporary art? What message does it send out to the artists of the region, that such venues (which by and large ignore local artists and contemporary art in general) can now find the time, resources, and gallery space to provide the red carpet treatment for the British Art Show? This opportunistic and piecemeal engagement with contemporary art and artists is a bit like a fractious relationship; in which an unhappy couple put on a show on for 'visitors', (in this case the Hayward), and exude a certain cosy togetherness; but as soon their visitors have departed, the couple revert back to their miserable relationship, living separate lives and hardly speaking to each other. I say this because the question must be asked: will the British Art Show be the catalyst for these venues to engage with contemporary art and artists on a more consistent level? Although a venue such as Arnolfini has a less than impressive track record in staging exhibitions involving any Bristol-based

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artists, it does at least have a consistent programme of contemporary art. The same cannot be said of either Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery or Royal West of England Academy. The arrival of the British Art Show in Bristol also raises the question as to who are or might be the ultimate beneficiaries of such a venture. Is it the local institutions that can rub shoulders with London's finest? Or is it the provincial artists who could, presumably, learn a thing or two from visiting a must-see exhibition of London-dominated new British art? Maybe it's Bristol's gallery-going audiences who are now being treated to a 'proper' programme of (inter)national contemporary art.

It might be argued that in showing a capacity to stage such an exhibition, Bristol will be able to attract bigger and better projects, perhaps even one day be rewarded with being a European City of Culture. However, although these may be prospective benefits for staging the British Art Show, where do artists from the city and wider region fit in? If they don't fit in to the bigger picture now, will they ever? When the British Art Show is a distant memory, will the likes of Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and Royal West of England Academy still be programming contemporary art on a more regular basis?

Although described as a "most ambitious survey of new and recent developments in art from the UK" [v] it says something about what constitutes 'British art' that two thirds of those selected for this year's British Art Show actually live and work in London. [See Karen Di Franco's pie charts, elsewhere in this publication]. None of the rest are based anywhere near what could remotely be described as the South West region. However, this bias towards London has always been the case with the British Art Show, so there is at least a consistency to this skewed vision of 'British' art. But not all artists can or want to live in London. London is in any case already full to bursting with (struggling) artists.

In the context of public funding for the arts, the arrival of the British Art Show in Bristol presents us with a dispiriting scenario. Despite the great expense and energy spent on reorganising arts funding and devolving 'power' to the regions, the bigger and most self-regarding galleries in the South West and particularly those in Bristol continue to be tied to the apron strings of the London art world. If the major (and not so major) providers of contemporary art in Bristol engaged more widely and regularly with artists based in the region, projects such as the British Art Show (and even Beck's Futures) could be considered as part of the city's ongoing and credible attempts to create a more dynamic arts strategy, one that can marry local, national and international practice. However, because Bristol's publicly subsidised gallery spaces appear to pay little attention to the majority of artists based in the region, the welcoming of the London-centric art world appears all the more pointed and problematic. If gallery programmes across Bristol reflect anything, it is that they rarely appear to be

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under any obligation from funders to improve their relationship with Bristol's artistic community.

In 2006, the British Art Show in Manchester was hosted at a number of venues. Alongside the obligatory galleries such as the Cornerhouse, Whitworth Art Gallery, and the City Art Galleries, it was also hosted at the International 3 (formerly The Annual Programme and Work & Leisure International). This may be a sign that Manchester's artists are no longer considered to be marginal within their city. That they have a positive purpose, other than being a thorn in the flesh of their local galleries. It's possibly a sign of the times that in Bristol, artist-led ventures such as ROOM and Station have seemingly been welcomed into the fold. However, it may also suggest that, despite the rhetoric of 'devolving power to the regions', the power of a London-centric art world is still enough to mesmerise and call the tune with visual arts institutions, no matter how big or how small.

i British Art Show 4, Manchester 12 November 1995 - 4 February 1996

ii Quoted from the press release for the exhibition Ha! in Life is Good in Manchester, The Annual Programme, 1995 to 2000, ed. Simon Grennan, Trice Publications n.d. p.16

iii ibid.

iv During 1995, Martin Vincent, David Mackintosh and I formed the art band Die Kunst

v www.hayward.org.uk/britishartshow6/bas6.html

A Trans-City Perspective

Relating local-national-international

The artist-led scene that I know in Manchester has, over the past ten years or so, developed as a series of responses to the lack of exhibiting opportunities and as a series of strategies to infiltrate the institutional art system. More than just settings for artists to collect CV points (with the hope of getting a foot in the doors of art institutions and dealers) they are also platforms for challenging the models of how art is packaged, (re) presented and traded. Integral to this process, the artists also benefit from the hands-on experience of project management and a higher level of networking opportunities, thus empowering them with a currency for exchange with similar groups in other locations. In marked contrast to the inflexibility and lack of imagination of many museums and institutions, artist-led culture (which is, at its best experimental, reflexive and irreverent) can create a new art identity for a city in a short space of time and contribute to the mythology of the place.

In a climate in which the reinforcement of the art-for-society's-sake idea is prevalent, it is not surprising that artist-led initiatives may be the only spaces left in which there is still the freedom and independence to develop critical art practice and counterpoints to the homogeneity of the art market. This market of course includes the validation systems of the publicly funded art institutions, national art exhibitions such as the British Art Show and international art events such as biennials.

Surprisingly perhaps, artist-led initiatives are often regarded as a lowly layer within an art hierarchy and as a result attract very little in the way of financial resources or credit for the visibility of art in a city. However it is precisely this layer of art activity that channels innovative practice and is the lifeblood of an art scene. There are many such projects that have taken this approach in UK urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Nottingham, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter, Belfast and Brighton.

In just a decade, Manchester (and conjoining Salford) has become a location that now has a reputation of sustaining an interesting and dynamic artist-led culture of activity. In the early 1990s, visual artists had little more than the meagrely funded Castlefield Gallery that attempted to invigorate the art scene with its exhibitions and professional development programmes. A few artist collectives (e.g. Index) also existed, plus a handful of artists' annual open studios. The scene was localised and barely registered on any wider scale.

What has made Manchester visible as a visual arts hub is the proliferation of artist-led activities that have created a perception of a vigorous culture of visual arts activity, among visual art communities nationally and even internationally. The evolution of this scene is often traced back to an exhibition titled Ha! in 1995 (which as exhibiting artist Graham Parker wrote in 2003 for a-n Magazine) "responded to the metrocentric selection of the 'British Art

Show'". The inclusion in Ha! of only Manchester-based artists made a pointed statement as a critique of the British Art Show 4 that was about to be launched in seven venues across the city. A defiant venture, Ha! was successful, as it was the right action at the right time, commenting as much on the yBa overload as on the establishment's support for them, and the complicity of Manchester's principle art venues, in that support.

Many of Ha!'s artists have since gone on to develop collectives and artist-led spaces in Manchester and Salford, such as The Annual Programme, Bono & Sting, Brass Art, the International 3 and Floating IP. Furthermore, the activities of these initiatives were not restricted to the wider Manchester area, but were taken to locations such as New York and Venice.

Groups such as Mart explored particular models of artist-led curating. In the autumn of 1999, Mart 99 presented fourteen self-curated shows with 45 artists that took place concurrently in mostly alternative spaces in Manchester city centre. In 2000, Mart brought together artist-led scenes from Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle in a three-way exchange of artist-curated exhibitions. More recently groups such as Apartment and Another Product are establishing themselves as curatorial projects that create links with artists in mainland Europe.

There is now a palpable level of ambition amongst emerging artists in Manchester and a basic level of acknowledgement and support from the mainstream institutions and councils that simply was not present ten years ago. There is also a sense of the players in the city - from municipal art galleries to universities, from artist-led projects to studios – acknowledging each other and believing in the strength and potential of this diversity. However this ecosystem is fragile and faces a number of threats, in the form of constant urban regeneration (bringing with it a threat to both the availability of studio space and temporary gallery space) and the impulse from certain quarters to treat the visual arts as being primarily of economic or social value.

A city that undermines or tries to exploit its artist-led layer fosters an insular reputation, which in turn stifles its own cultural aspirations. Conversely in supporting diversity - the initiatives and symbiotic relationships that are present - a city encourages a dynamism that retains its artists, builds its audience and draws positive attention from outside of the area. Those in positions of influence - be that in the local government, the arts funding system, or senior curatorial posts – must possess leadership and generosity, vision and flexibility to have a chance for an organic and rooted visual arts culture to develop and thrive.

Cause and effect

In the 1990s, Manchester artists could not rely on the city's art institutions or local authorities to champion

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their projects. Artists were ready to establish a role for themselves in the national art scene and demonstrated this by getting on and sorting it out for themselves. They were playing the local-to-global game and British Art Show 4 happened to be the catalyst to a bigger playing field and greater critical attention.

In late January 2006 the British Art Show once again came to town, with less fanfare this time - not being the first host for a touring project usually means very little or no national or international press attention. Manchester's artists responded very differently to those from other cities who are also hosting British Art Show 6. Some may argue that unlike 1995, having fringe activities running alongside British Art Show 6 would not contribute anything more to the dynamism of the Manchester art scene. One project that did happen was SMALLpond, a collaboration between studio groups in launching a portal website. To most of Manchester's artists however, British Art Show 6 was a fleeting moment that did no more than bring some interesting artwork to the city.

Ten years on, the British Art Show appears to be as London-centric as ever, though it is worth remembering that many of the capital's artists have moved there from other cities and towns, and that a large number of the British Art Show 6 artists were not even born in Britain. [See Karen Di Franco's pie charts, elsewhere in this publication]. To the seven participating venues, Castlefield Gallery and International 3 included, audience figures doubled, with many anecdotal reports of first time (and hopefully returning) visitors. With the departure of the British Art Show from Manchester it is business as usual for the city's artist-led scene. That is, how to survive and create bilateral relationships with other artists and groups locally and internationally.

While Bristol is preparing for its housing of British Art Show 6, its artists undoubtedly will be interested to know how this exhibition relates to them. I think that directly it probably will not, but indirectly it may (re)open up opportunities for negotiation between themselves and the various layers in the city. There may well be artists, groups, initiatives and institutions that, prior to the arrival in Bristol of the British Art Show, may not have had cause to work together. A plethora of new working relationships between these people and venues might generate further opportunities. Notwithstanding Bristol's property boom, there are likely to be empty buildings that the City Council owns, which could be entrusted to artists for short or medium-term projects. There could be a role for an art institution to work with an artist-led organisation on mentoring schemes, in partnership with one of Bristol's universities. Some of these ideas may have been previously explored, but what the British Art Show 6 can do is to provide a platform to take stock and look towards the future of artists working in Bristol and perhaps more importantly projecting that image to national and international networks.

In my research for this article I jotted down all the artist-

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led projects, studio groups and publicly funded art venues in Bristol that I know and then used the Internet to check for information on them. Interestingly I could only find current projects and organisations and even then, there were no apparent or declared links between the various entities. Surprised, I did the same for Manchester and came up with only marginally better results. In other words, the other artist-led projects that I know to have taken place over the past ten years or so were simply not adequately documented. And years on, a number of these initiatives may well now only exist in the minds of those who experienced them. It is essential for both artists and audiences that these histories are properly recorded and that a comprehensive artists' archive is built and developed. As living art history, as a tool to promote artists and the city itself, and as a research aid for future international collaborations. The benefits of such an archive are almost endless. In conclusion I think that each city should preserve, document and develop its various visual arts layers. There should be a concerted mapping of artist-led projects, so that these are not lost to history and to ensure that more and more people can learn about the visual arts activity taking place around them.

A Sort of Colonial Endeavour

British Art Show 6, the Hayward Gallery's selected survey of contemporary British art, will be touring to different UK cities. After opening at Baltic in Gateshead the show has then gone on to Manchester, Nottingham and finally Bristol in July 2006, where the work will be hosted by a number of different institutions and organisations across several sites. As much as I welcome the greater exposure of contemporary art, I do however have reservations as to what exactly this exhibition is and how will it work in a city such as Bristol. At the present time, does Bristol need such a survey of contemporary British art? With the variety of contemporary art surveys occurring at the moment, such as the Tate Triennial and Beck's Futures, how does this exhibition stand in comparison? Indeed, Beck's Futures has recently been shown in Bristol, and not long ago we have had Bloomberg New Contemporaries. With these exhibitions declaring themselves as presenting the best of new contemporary art in Britain, why do we need to host the British Art Show, which pretty much makes the same sorts of claims? Do we as a city or as an arts community need the British Art Show? As the exhibition does not open here until July, I cannot make an appraisal or assessment of the work on show. I can only speculate on the impact such an exhibition will have in Bristol.

To this end, it is not necessarily the work within the British Art Show that becomes a key factor, but rather, the multiple ways in which the exhibition might engage with and throw into sharp relief the practice and status of those within Bristol's resident art community. The exhibition's Bristol organisers are encouraging artists' applications to the Arts Council for projects to happen concurrently with the British Art Show's residence in the city. Indeed, the exhibition itself is becoming a perhaps opportunistic focal point for local artists, using the British Art Show's high profile and publicity for their own gain. Maybe such strategic machinations are inevitable, given that they show an understanding of the exhibition not solely as exposure of new work to Bristol audiences. Like artists in other cities to which the exhibition has toured, Bristol's practitioners are minded to view the British Art Show as a promotional tool for themselves and their art. In this regard, the contents of the exhibition are of lesser importance when set against other agendas (for example, the Hayward's agenda of shipping works out to the provinces - beyond the boundaries of London - in a sort of colonial endeavour).

This inescapable feeling of having the British Art Show *imposed* on us might have been avoided had the exhibition itself included a London viewing. Is the exhibition somehow not good enough for London? Or was it considered surplus to requirement in what amounts to a crowded artistic landscape? In choosing not to exhibit the British Art Show in the capital, the Hayward Gallery has in effect created a problematic 'not good enough for London but good enough for the provinces' schism. The London/provinces divide and imbalance does of course exist but it is a divide that

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does not sit comfortably with the arts community of Bristol. The city has a very critical, knowledgeable and self-conscious arts community, a community located significantly less than two hours' travel time from central London and very aware of London-centric attitudes towards arts production. So I have to ask if the British Art Show and its tour to the provinces, in its own curious and inverted way, is another demonstration of the London art world's hegemony?

Bristol is a provincial city, and as such often needs to forge its own cultural identity, its cultural existence. More often than not, a capital city such as London doesn't need to justify its existence as a major centre for art production and appreciation. It is indisputable that London represents an abundance of artistic riches. In contrast, Bristol's offerings of visual culture are relatively modest, and there is certainly a need for us to generate (and keep generating) our own art and culture. We need to pitch for visitors interested in visual culture, as much as those of us who comprise Bristol's art community have to constantly court the attention of the city's residents. The British Art Show may well be a good tool to pitch with, but it is not, as far as I know, a show that the city bid for. It has instead, apparently been imposed upon us through the Hayward Gallery's curatorial agenda or some other such machinations. The arrival of this mega exhibition in Bristol effectively means that agendas of institutional programming become bound up with contemporary curatorial narratives that in turn are bound up with the reception of the British Art Show in the city. The arguably colonial manoeuvre of having the exhibition imposed on us is compounded and complicated by an absence of Bristol artists from the British Art Show, leading to a perhaps not unreasonable question. Are there any significant artists in Bristol? If the answer is in the affirmative, why aren't any of these artists represented in the British Art Show?

I believe that there is a cluster of good arts activity in the city, leading to the production of a range of interesting work. And with more of a demonstration of belief in certain artists' work and a sponsoring of their practice, key institutions in the city could raise levels of critical awareness of work happening in Bristol, perhaps even manage to push it more firmly onto the radar of local and national audiences, as well as onto the radar of London's curators and gallery directors. With the exception of one or two artist-led organisations, institutions in the city do not seem to have the confidence to champion artists who have not been previously selected or validated by other curators, particular those working within the capital.

There is much that the dominant art institutions of Bristol can learn from smaller initiatives. Utilising temporary spaces, projects such as LOT and Plan 9 have pioneered the practice of exhibiting local artists and recent graduates alongside more established practitioners. For the duration of the British Art Show, Plan 9 is hosting an exhibition showing the work of Bristol artists.[i] Whilst I have no doubt that the show will be an interesting alternative, I am nevertheless wary of initiatives that might - inadvertently perhaps - underline the divide between the *imported* British Art Show artists and those resident in the city. Separate exhibitions such as the Plan 9 one will inevitably emphasise the British Art Show's distinction between London as a centre of affluent arts production and those provincial cities deemed - condescendingly perhaps - to be in need of further *development* and benevolent attention.

Initiatives that are primarily reactions to the British Art Show mean that such work is viewed not so much as existing in its own right, but existing instead as a defensive or opportunistic reaction. This is particularly unfortunate, as the work in the Plan 9 exhibition is undoubtedly deserving of more attention, out of the shadows of the British Art Show. It makes me question if indeed this is the most appropriate way to view the work by each of the participating artists, both that of the British Art Show artists and those showing in Plan 9's exhibition. I would much more favour an equal exchange, and an equal attitude to viewing all the work on show. It is - in my opinion - much better to view all works as valid pieces in their own right, rather than having to approach complimentary exhibitions as reactive add-ons. Inevitably, issues of status may well hover over the Plan 9 display. It is by encouraging local initiatives alongside the British Art Show and making links with its exhibiting artists, introducing them to the city and creating a genuine dialogue with them, that the *local* and the *visiting* artists will begin to stand as equals. Elsewhere, the arrival of the British Art Show brings positive opportunities for change. Arts organisations in Bristol have no tangible history of truly engaging with each other for the benefit of artists and audiences. With the necessity of collaboration foisted upon them, the links that are developing between various art spaces, contemporary galleries, traditional museums and experimental sites, should serve as foundations for future work, building stronger relationships throughout the city, which hopefully could lead to future visual arts collaborations and a bit more institutional faith in the more accomplished of Bristol's artists.

[i]. Wig Wam Bam! An exhibition of Bristol-based artists selected by British Art Show artists Claire Barclay and Marcus Coates, and Bristol Savage Geoff Molyneux. Red Lodge Museum, Park Row, Bristol, 14 July - 17 September 2006.

The Issue of Locality or Becoming a Local

I have been lately asking myself: what does it mean to be a local artist? What does it mean to be living within a particular or a specific locality? Maybe it is because I am a Peruvian, from a Spanish background, currently living in London after living in Bristol, or maybe because when I moved to London from Bristol I was confronted by the contrast of what it means to be an artist in these two nearby cities defined by very different contexts.

After four years away from Peru, the issue of locality, and its complex implications, seem to me more relevant than ever. The issue of locality brings up essential questions about how you want to be perceived and how you perceive yourself when developing your practice.

When I first arrived in Bristol, I had almost no idea of the city, I must confess. More than a calculated plan, it was by chance I ended up here. Having no familiarity with the city, I soon realised that in order to begin a new life and become visible as an artist, starting from the beginning was the obvious thing to do.

Arnolfini was my starting point. For me it was a landmark, a sign that there must be an art scene in Bristol, something going on. It also used to have a nice bar (not anymore) where I would spend time having a coffee while thinking about my next move: finding a place to work. Searching for studio spaces, Spike Island was easy to find. It is the largest studios in Bristol and it is one of the most important arts institutions in the city. By securing a studio at Spike Island I hoped that I might be able to engage in a local critical discourse.

But Spike Island was too busy or not impressed by the photographs of my work so I didn't get in. More difficult to find were the other studios run by artists. Two of them, Jamaica Street Studios and Mivart, have been established for a long time and house a large number of artists, but are less well funded and consequently, relatively less visible than Spike Island. Luckily for me, there was a space available at Jamaica Street Studios. As part of Jamaica Street Artists, I was soon introduced to several independent artists' initiatives in Bristol, to the complex though often insufficient relationships between the different studio organisations and to the difficulties of running a space, applying for funding (a form of art in itself and entirely new for me), or creating spaces inside the city for promoting your work.

It is interesting how you build a sense of belonging to a place by making friends and connections and learning how the system within the city operates. Becoming a part of things is somehow much easier in a small place and it was not very difficult to be welcomed by Bristol. The few spaces that comprise the local art scene are easy to find and the small number of visual arts events give you the opportunity to get in contact with other artists and meet them at each new opening. Soon you start to consider

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yourself a 'local artist' and with that come the difficulties of being one.
Artists who have decided to live in Bristol have to face the lack of audiences and commercial spaces within the city and need to create a structure that allows them to stay and make a living. They often turn to collective initiatives with the common aspiration of increasing their opportunities and visibility in the city. Art practice in Bristol, like in many other small cities, relies more on artist-led initiatives than on the market. Artist-led initiatives have the potential to be exciting, gratifying and above all, interesting undertakings.

But where does all this potential go when landmark institutions have no special interest in engaging with artists working in the locality; when the artists within reach are understood by local government as little more than instruments of city regeneration; and when public funding is mainly given to encourage 'educational or socially engaged' artistic practices? Many artists with career ambitions of exhibiting and promoting their work are forced to move to London. Success is not guaranteed but if it happens, the recognition of the market and the big city might then finally open the doors of the 'local institutions'.

London's crowded art market is decidedly 'international' and mostly fed by artists from far and wide, each one struggling to present him or herself as unique. In a large city such as London, cosmopolitanism supersedes local or regional identity, and where one is from may become a marketable commodity. Irrespective of one's origins, foreign or British, irrespective of one's perceived or declared ethnicity or nationality, artists are constantly pushed into playing the identity game. And if the locality of their origin is distant enough, this allows the market to present them as exotic or otherwise 'interesting'.

How significant is it then to be identified as a local artist or to define yourself by your locality? I think it depends. If the local is understood as merely a synonym for restricted or limited, then the possibilities for 'local' artists become similarly limited. More positively, the local ought perhaps to be regarded as a state of being, a creative space for negotiating and finding alternatives, neither in opposition or subordinated to the global.

Geography plays an interesting role in the presentation of local art scenes. Local strategies are easier to develop as a response to the centre when the distance (physical and emotional) is greater. At only 1 hour and 45 minutes from London, Bristol is not the centre but not totally the periphery, which makes it a very difficult space in which to develop a local identity, whatever that means.

So, what is the strategy to adopt in Bristol when its art scene is generally defined by its proximity and relation to London? When you are defined by a negation, by not being something, there is a danger in becoming a local by not being, or not signifying, global, and artists in Bristol facing this problem have been pursuing alternative strategies to try to overcome this constraint. Many artists, who decided to stay, have been working and promoting themselves from the city but looking outside. They have been trying to engage the city with a broader discourse and interesting proposals have emerged from this necessity to create a dialogue between the local and the global. Meanwhile, Bristol has become a host of big events which bring major artists to the local setting and, arguably, locates Bristol within a wider art scene. Of course these shows also give the artists in the city the opportunity to earn some cash by taking part in invigilation or doing other related work. But is this what artists want? To be content just with art-work related opportunities? Fortunately artists working in Bristol do not think so and have endeavoured to open up other possibilities

While living in Bristol I have seen inspiring spaces arising from artist-led initiatives. With their differing agendas, LOT and Plan 9 are two such projects that have enhanced the Bristol art scene. Both were, for a time, situated in the same area of the city centre.

LOT's agenda seems - in part at least - to be to develop curatorial projects hinged on a Bristol - London connection. LOT seeks to move toward finding a place in the dominant market by encouraging links between both cities, presenting shows with artists connected with the London art scene and inserting artists working in Bristol into the London market.

Plan 9 on the other hand seems to have looked towards international connections outside the traditional Bristol - London circuit as another viable way to promote the artists working here. Maybe this is the way forward when London's highly productive art scene is also highly saturated, and maybe presenting yourself as a local Bristol artist in distant cities, has more potential. In this case, instead of moving towards a powerful centre, the plan is to find another place, distant enough to allow one freedom of movement.

If any of these strategies succeed, it will be interesting to see the direction of local production and how the practice of artists working in Bristol is influenced by these alternatives. The production of art to be presented in a gallery is arguably characteristic of cities like London, dominated by the market, and might or might not be an interesting way to move forward in Bristol. Then again, networking is essential for artistic practice but when networking becomes the form of art *per se*, the results are not always as interesting as the intentions.

In any case, presenting yourself in relation to a locality implies taking responsibility. Responsibility about where you come from, where you are now and where you want to go, and as an artist, being confronted with making decisions on your work, appears always as an exciting panorama.

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