



Chapter 5. The Liverpool Artists' Sessions. Robert Knifton.

Since the mid-1960s, Liverpool has altered immeasurably – physically through the regenerating of the urban fabric, but also through its shifting cultural positioning. A cursory glance towards the artistic endeavours that have thrived in the city in recent years attests to this. From Open Eye Gallery, through *Visionfest* and *Video Positive*, *8 Days A Week*, *Static*, *Black Diamond*, *Museum Man*, *Further Up In The Air*, to the A Foundation and Liverpool Biennial, there has been a rich, varied flowering of visual arts creativity.

Yet many of John Willett's concerns for the city's artistic community remain pressing topics: the quality and style of arts education, the scarcity of patronage and exhibition sites, and perhaps most vitally, the specifics of place – how the Liverpool of perception compounds upon its reality, how this impacts on an artist's creative work – and further, the very spaces artists are able to inhabit in the city.

In the winter of 2007/08 I met and interviewed a range of artists based in Liverpool. They all relate to this city in their work, directly or obliquely, through their negotiation of its history and memory, the spaces of the city and notion of place. By portraying this small snapshot of practices, just a fraction of the current vibrant Liverpool art scene, this chapter will question what it means to be a Liverpool-based artist in 2008. How have contemporary artists conceptualised their city? How have its processes of regeneration affected their relationship with its spaces? And how can its particular character and identity fit into the globalised contemporary art world?

Alan Dunn, *The Ballad of Ray+Julie*, 2005 (10th Anniversary of original *Ray+Julie* sculpture), 20 x 10ft billboard, Seel Street / Slater Street, Liverpool.
(Photograph, Alan Dunn)

‘It’s like planting seeds across the city’ – Alan Dunn

Alan Dunn moved to Liverpool from Glasgow in 1994. His work addresses the urban fabric across multiple artistic media, from sculpture, sound art and video, to his ambitious billboard project, and internet work with *tenantspin*. Glasgow shaped Dunn’s approach to the city. In 1990 he organised *Bellgrove*, an Arts Council funded project during Glasgow’s City of Culture. *Bellgrove* ran for twelve months, bringing in a wide range of artists and writers such as James Kelman, Douglas Gordon, Thomas Lawson and Grennan & Sperandio to exhibit on a billboard in the railway station. As in later Liverpool works, the liminal nature of this space was vital for Dunn, acting upon movement through the city:

Bellgrove was an amazing space, the Victorian arches coming into the station, leaving the city centre through the tunnel, leaving thoughts of the city centre behind. The site was in the heart of the East End, near Parkhead, all my aunts, uncles and nans would see it. I recently did a similar project about Bold Street as a threshold; being the start of going to the cinema or to a shop. The city isn’t just about the city centre; it’s the moments before, the build-up to cultural spaces. This city is fantastic for that.

Dunn’s first work after moving to Liverpool was the sculptural installation, *Ray+Julie*, a collaboration with Brigitte Jurack. Dunn explains how the piece came about:

I was commissioned by *Visionfest*, just as I moved into Liverpool. Having *Visionfest* running every autumn was fantastic: all the artists came out of the woodwork and made work for it, pre-Biennial, pre-Capital of Culture. Because there were no formal galleries involved we used a lot of unusual spaces. The London Road commission was for a temporary sculpture on a spot of land between the Furniture Resource Centre and the Lord Warden pub. We

pitched two Rennie Mackintosh style uncomfortable chairs facing each other called *Ray+Julie* after the graffiti at the back of the site. We wanted poetically to give the sense that maybe these people once inhabited the site, and here were their chairs left behind. This was December 1995 and they're still there. They've embedded themselves in the fabric and become a symbol of the unchanging state of London Road. London Road has almost gone downhill since then whilst other parts of the city have moved on.

Dunn recently revisited *Ray+Julie* in a billboard work:

I did a ten-year anniversary, invited some artists to respond to the chairs. That was to do with the civic idea of anniversaries, like the 800 year anniversary of the city, 40 years since Sergeant Pepper. I felt we'd done quite well to reach 10, let's celebrate this! Those billboards appeared over on Seel Street. It's another underlying idea in my work, taking one part of the city, photographing, painting it and putting it in another part. There is something quite shocking about an image of London Road in Seel Street. It's an image of my walking through the city.

The Liverpool Billboard Project has seen Dunn organise artworks throughout the city for many years by artists including Fiona Banner, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Erwin Wurm, Scanner, Robert Pollard and Alma Tischler-Wood. The works are startling: presented without the reassuring contextualisation that surrounds works in galleries, they instead disrupt our relation with the city, placing memories or leaving traces that defy the regenerated cityscape:

It's like planting seeds across the city, scattering seeds, and maybe a few years later something might come to fruition. I never do launches or private views; I enjoy the slow reaction that might come a few years later through memory.

I recently found an Everton website talking now about the [footballer Wayne] Rooney billboard I did four years ago, for example. I enjoy when the billboards are removed, as if there's no need there any more for images. There's a little row of houses on Park Road where some Liverpool Billboard Project works once stood – David Jacques, Langlands & Bell, Sue Leask, Pavel Büchler amongst others. I'm sure people only remember these works (albeit fleetingly) when the billboards have gone.

As co-ordinator for *tenantspin* at FACT, Dunn helped pioneer a new form of community art:

It wasn't a geographical community, but based on age and high-rise across the city, in different flats, dealing with these communities in their own spaces. *tenantspin* was an extraordinary journey; it found a way of communicating between artists, curators and residents. *tenantspin* pioneered a flexible working process – collaborating for an hour or a month. It was unique in terms of the project being held back by technology – it quickly moved beyond what was possible, so we worked on performance pieces and gallery presentations. At New York's MOCA the first challenge was how to represent such a project in a gallery, so we decided to take a selection of the high-rise tenants over to New York. Similar things happened in Sweden, Germany, Denmark.

The global reach of *tenantspin*, and of Dunn's billboard project, is for the artist part of negotiating Liverpool's position in the wider world:

I see myself as making work about and principally for Liverpool. It's about bringing in a global perspective on the local. I try to bring in artists in such a way that creates links. In my latest billboard project it was all by emails, no-one came to Liverpool physically. I'm developing strategies away from studio space, working in the spaces travelled through the city, creating space in a broken-up art world, structuring around different daily everyday realities. There's the concept of cities on the edge, Marseille, Istanbul etc., but I try to go beyond that, I try to get artists who reflect the chaotic element of Liverpool.