

**Spectator T Symposium  
Transcript of papers  
(Extract)**

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## **Why Art Sheffield 05 is not a Biennial.**

**Steve Dutton**

I've been unsure, ever since agreeing to do this talk quite how to approach this and when pushed realised that to speak as a Director of SCAF, which is the loose coalition, or company, of artists and institutions responsible for developing the programme, and as an artist who clearly has an interest in the experimental aspect of the programme as a method of rethinking certain practices, particularly in terms of my adopted city would be the only way to do it.

There are two aspects of Art Sheffield 05 that keep coming back to so, I'm going to touch on both and suggest that they meet somewhere along the way.

The first concerns the status and aura which surround and feed on the idea of the biennial, whether it is Venice, Istanbul, Liverpool, Sao Paulo, et al, what it means in relation to this programme, effectively now on its third cycle, a two yearly art event which does NOT define itself as a biennial, and thus how this programme might define itself in relation to or up against the biennial. (The odd thing is that though we were aware that, amongst other things we were keen to develop a city wide programme which took place every second year, we all agreed that we didn't want it to be a Biennial, whatever that might mean.)

The second concerns the manner or the method by which SCAF approached the programme, particularly the very specific approach Gavin Wade in his introduction of the character Tony T.

The answer as to why Art Sheffield 05 is not a biennial and what that might signify is probably addressed somewhere between these two concerns...

Throughout I will be making use of a strategy used at by Michael Phillipson in his 1995 text, "Managing 'tradition'. The plight of Aesthetic practices and their analysis in a techno scientific culture" in which he articulates a difference between art and "art" as, that which, on the one hand is fully assimilated, and that on the hand which is taking place at the edges of assimilation, or within which the process of assimilation is taking place but not yet complete and /or within which the very forms which assimilation takes are dependent upon the art itself for definition.

In a review of Art Sheffield 03 the Guardian writer Alfred Hickling made the ironic comparison between Sheffield, London, Paris and New York with the implication that Sheffield might be struggling to reach the giddy heights of such "Art Capitals", despite its abundance of artists, studios and galleries/project spaces.

Hickling commented, using a piece of my own work as his metaphor, that there was no audience for art in Sheffield. But my thinking here isn't so much that Sheffield does or doesn't have an indigenous audience, one could easily argue the same case for Venice whose population rests at around 60,000. The issue, which typifies some of the thinking around this event, is that Hickling goes on to say that ArtSheffield 03 was an "admirable profile raising event, which the organisers hope to develop into a biennial."

So, there's something being said in Hickling's comments which implies more about his ideas of what constitutes a Biennial than mere visitor numbers.

The Biennial is more than a two year event, the biennial is now the "Biennial" and it confers on the city a sort of state of cultural grace. It tells us that the city is knowing, global, grown up enough to appreciate art, the subtext of which is that it knows how to handle difference and dissent, risk and dare I say it, dreams and conflict.

As Julian Stallabrass points out in *Art Incorporated* the biennial is powerfully ideologically grounded. Stallabrass argues,

"One example would be the Istanbul Biennial, which is part of the Turkish government's effort to assure the European Union that the nation conforms closely enough to secular and neoliberal standards to warrant membership. Another, the Havana Biennial serves to give the Cuban government a more lenient and culturally open-minded image by sanctioning dissent within this narrow and delimited frame"

Stallabrass goes on to state that the biennial does for a city what a Picasso above the fireplace does for a tobacco executive and that "it not only embodies but actively propagandises the virtues of globalisation"

What may have been at stake in Hickling's comments and what is a key issue as far as Art Sheffield 05 is concerned is this relationship to the "biennial" culture. The issue is something akin to a membership of a club, and more importantly the desire to be seen to be a member of it. This assumption that Sheffield aspires to become a member of a club of elite global players, in which the principles of "art", that is Phillipson's fully assimilated version, may be profoundly mistaken, and if taken as read would certainly colour the work and aspirations of Art Sheffield 05 and the artists who are part of it.

We will be aware that this club is made of cities whose guiding principles are being mapped onto the global consciousness via the biennial networks as principles and icons of universality, openness, transformative potential, secular tolerance and creative risk. A club whose aspirations are so decidedly utopian that you have to share the vision and the resources, physical, intellectual and financial, in order to join, and to share the vision you have to be visionary, and to be able to be visionary you have to be blessed. A club, where in short, the benefits of membership amount to an image of advancing and brilliant humanist neo-liberal luminosity contained within the secure hands of steady economic growth.

In short it is this membership, which Alfred Hickling eludes, and suggests that Sheffield may be struggling to join. He is probably right. But the fact is, we never wanted to.

According to Rosa Martinez, curator of this year's "always a little further" at the Venice Biennial, the "ideal biennial is a profoundly political and spiritual event. It contemplates the present with a desire to transform it. As Arthur Danto says, in a definition I love, a biennial is a glimpse of a transnational utopia"<sup>1</sup>

Well we knew weren't doing THAT. This is Sheffield after all, and we also know we were not naïve enough to think we could, at this point in the development of SCAF, suggest that Sheffield Art 05 was some kind of alternative biennial, or should that be, to use Phillipson's strategy, the "alternative" "biennial".

This issue of an alternative becomes even more complex when we consider the relation of fringe or alternative events, which are sanctioned by the Biennial and thus quickly become "Fringe" or "Alternative" events.

An issue which in itself is particularly thorny as of course most Biennials wouldn't be the genuine article, that is, they wouldn't encompass the biennial principles of openness and dialogue unless they somehow sustained some fringe activity which, to quote this year's Istanbul Biennial's official blurb in relation to its own fringe activities which could "voice all that was suppressed".

Martin Herbert's recent observations in Art Monthly in "What is the alternative?" come to mind, where he makes the acute observation that the "alternative" artspace listings within the pages of Time Out were re-classified in the mid- nineties to the status of "upcoming"<sup>ii</sup>. The observation being that where once the alternative had been counter to, or other than, or strategically across, in becoming upcoming it became the same as, but not fully developed yet, but bound to the same linear forces, a kind of child and natural inheritor of the precious capital of the established spaces.

The situation this year in Prague was also interesting in which allegedly acrimonious relationships between Flash art's Giancarlo Politi and Milan Knizak the General Director of the National gallery In Prague. The details of the fall out were bewildering to the spectator and I genuinely don't feel I can comment on what was happening behind the scenes. Eventually though, relationships soured to such an extent that it led to the simultaneous development of TWO Biennials running at the same time, a sort of bi-biennial, both claiming the rights to the real original biennial and the other was a sort of hanger-on and neither having the nerve to call themselves the alternative. Quite where the fringe or alternative events of either of those Biennials felt they should go is hard to imagine, unless both fringes were to meet in a kind of cultural centre parting or alternatively kind of contemporary art version of a mullet.

Obviously any such claims Art Sheffield 05 might make towards alternativeness would be fraudulent. But I would make the claim that, the attempt by SCAF and Gavin Wade in particular to address something other than the usual processes, and to a large extent the absence of the usual suspects, and the strategies many of the artists have adopted, gives Spectator T an interesting edge.

If Spectator T makes no such claims as to its alternative nature it might occupy a kind of hinterland, albeit a fairly foggy one and it might be bit of a mess, but then that's what hinterlands tend to be, because Spectator T does emerge, or attempt to emerge, from an image of locality, that is, almost by definition hostile to take over bids by even the faintest whiff of any patronising global take-over.

Those of you who have read Gavin Wade's text will note that his intention was precisely this; to work from a different position than the typically universalistic and utopian Biennial premise, but even here, while Gavin bravely attempts to articulate and generate new thinking through his text and the factional construction of Tony T we can see within his introduction even he inadvertently aligns us to an "upcoming" biennial potential rather than something other than a biennial, when he says.

"Imagine a biennial with a personality, with a strong position, clearly stated and relating to the locality but dealing with a universal concern! Or if that just sounds like every other biennial event, just imagine a biennial with a personality".

Perhaps it this issue of the global which lies at the heart of Spectator T and Gavin Wade's approach to it. This assumption which lies so powerfully at the centre of art practice that ultimately all our aims are indeed the same and are aimed at this international practice is under question here.

Whatever one makes of Gavin Wade's text and its literary qualities, and whatever one makes of his slip into Biennial think, what it does successfully signal is a genuine attempt to place specific location and sensibility at the heart of the curatorial process. An attempt of working from the inside out. An inside which is defiantly of this city and, at the absolute polar opposite end of the universal and global biennial transnational utopian aspirations.

Effectively, along with SCAF knowing what they didn't want, and Gavin's attempt to locate something within or without an act of destruction, an incident particular and specific to a time and place, it could be said that the motif, if there really is one, for the programme was one of wilful refusal.

Where the "biennials" tend to offer the loudest, most positivist claims for an inclusive, all-encompassing and hyperventilating YES! (Liverpool Trace, Venice's dreams and conflicts etc) Artsheffield05 timidly begins with a no sitting alongside a yes. A sort of YES, we don't have to do it that way.

The abiding image, of the trashed art work, for Art Sheffield 05 is entropic and joyfully negative. As Neil Webb and James Brown put it in the Spectator T website, the broken remains of 'Here are the Young Persons' scattered across the yard of a bowling green on the outskirts of Sheffield (where they had been taken by the local council after they had been destroyed) is a valid articulation and a potent image. It's as though the biennial is already in ruins.

As Liam Gillick has noted, the problems of art are significant only when one thinks of art as something different than anything else. Interestingly, the dubious claims of art to be something other or more important than anything else come most to the fore when something goes wrong. Gavin's trashed boards for one and his surprise at the fact, or the Gregor Schneider experience in Venice, in which the artist was refused permission by the Venetian authorities to build a replica of the Ka Ba. Schneider's proposal was to build a version of the Ka Ba; the most holy structure of Islam which stands at the heart of Mecca in the vast expanses of St. Marks Sq. Schneider was refused, unsurprisingly. What was surprising, at least to me, was the level of outraged indignation expressed by Schneider at the intolerance of the authorities and their fascistic stamping on the principles of free speech. I don't know, what did Schneider really expect? To then go on to make work which concerns the intractability of the authorities and the lack of free speech seems at best naive, and at worst opportunistic.

One of the doubts I initially felt about the way Art Sheffield 05 was moving was echoed by and articulated much better than I was able in the comments of Heather and Ivan Morrison's comments on the website.

"We liked the idea of an alphabet of spectators and Gavin Wade's anecdote of meeting Spectator T. However we found his long text from T's point of view unconvincing and the task of positioning our work in relation to this fictional character seems pointless. If T is the creation of Gavin Wade then we are reacting to Wade, and not to any real spectator. We are therefore presenting our proposal with a whole alphabet of possible actual spectators in mind."

Ironically, the effect of Gavin Wade's text is to colonise a voice by the voice of the artist in attempt to locate the vision of a spectator. But Gavin isn't locating a spectator; because Spectator T doesn't exist. The idea of Spectators A, B, C or T is a strong theoretical model but when it is applied to the individual being limited to a single and unshakeable spectator position, it is deeply flawed. By definition, it sets a limit upon the subject as

governed by a series of universalising principles and an authorial voice. Despite good intentions, the local is inevitably invaded by the universal, by theory.

Spectators A, B, C and T, I would make a guess exist in parts in all of us, and what might be seen as critical to our own Spectators A and B may simply be irritating to the Spectator T in all of us. Indeed, it may be the very rational sense of irritation which brings out the Spectator T within us.

..and I'd qualify this by making the case that while criticality is often felt as an irritant, as pointed out by JJ Charlesworth in his "dysfunction of criticism", I could add that if something is irritating it doesn't necessarily mean its critical.

In the end, though Tony T is a shibboleth, a fiction, an assumption, a vague and shadowy figure, part value judgment, distanced from sociological research, subjective and patronizing, he may have been only way forward for artsheffield05. His trashing of Gavin's work may not be so much about hating art. Indeed, there may well be a potential audience out there who appear to hate art, but in fact are not anti-art at all but anti the patronization of what might be seen, rightly or wrongly, as homogeneity of a global practices descending on a local context. Precisely the point at which it becomes "art".

It is the overall strategies and the artists' works of Art Sheffield 05 that is the sign of its intent rather than the idea of Spectator T alone. The point at which the various strategies come together. Gavin's brave text, the disruption of the standard curatorial practice, the call for nominations from artists applying, the successfully nominated artists then selecting from open submission and the way the artists have made the work.

If the Istanbul Biennial laid claims to addressing locality by attempting to refuse the grand spaces and insinuate itself into the fabric of the city, perhaps, through its processes SCAF attempted to force a change within itself by disrupting the flow of its production and representations, including its assumed "upcoming status as a Biennial".

Certainly in its ambiguous methods and in its developing intentions, in its sense of combined purpose and purposelessness and doubt, in Gavin's text whether I like it or not, and in its attempt to change the curatorial processes Sheffield Art 05 is making slow moves towards JJ Charlesworth's definition of criticality, in that, as an agency responsible for an attempting to foster an understanding and distribution of contemporary art within this city, it could be said in this instance that it "attempts to implicitly try to assess its own value within the realms of its own production and context".

Or at least, it's starting to.

Finally, I'd just like to quote from Tirdad Zolghadr review of the Venice Biennial in respect of what I won't think you will find here.

"Taking at face value the biennial paradigm forcing spectators to make active choices, I set up a strict viewing criteria to help manage the awesome flow of matter. For example, every film which might have been the doing of a myopic vacationer with Parkinson's disease I immediately disregarded. Every queue of more than 5 people I passed discretely by. And projects catering to the notion of artists as shamanic bohemians making dickheads out of themselves in public spaces, slinking about with no clothes on, hugging strange objects in subways, plopping their feet in ketchup red metaphors of misfortune, all of these I tactfully ignored."