

Liverpool Biennial

Liverpool

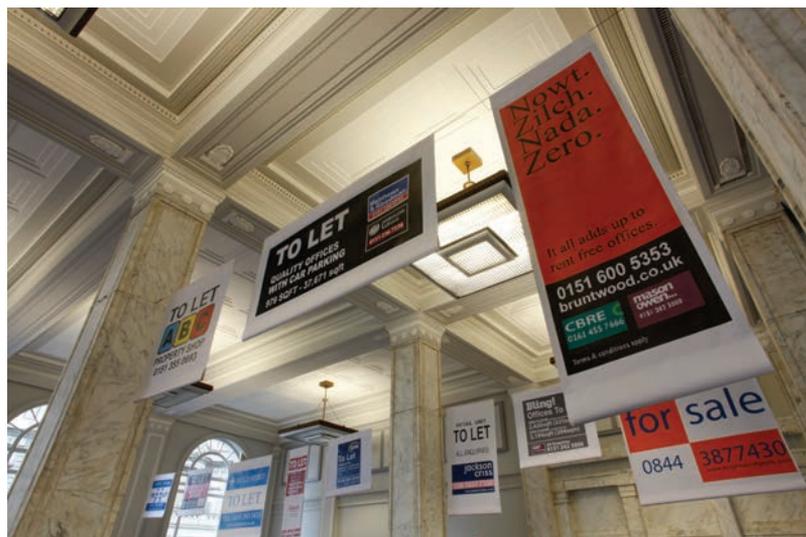
by ISABELLA MAIDMENT

A PROFESSIONAL BOUNCER in a black suit and tie stands in the centre of a city street guarding a freestanding stainless-steel door engraved with the sign 'VIP'. Slightly ajar, this life-size sculptural doorway leads nowhere; on approaching the entrance the visitor is met with the curt announcement: 'Your name's not on the list'. Part sculpture, part delegated performance, the work is an installation by the Scandinavian artists Elmgreen and Dragset commissioned as part of the seventh edition of the *Liverpool Biennial* (to 25th November),¹ the largest international festival of contemporary art in Britain. Staged to appear interactive yet ultimately denying the viewer's direct participation, *But I'm on the guest list too* (2012) is both a humorous nod to Liverpool's infamous club culture and a critical reflection on restricted access made in response to the theme of this year's biennial: hospitality.

Under the artistic direction of Sally Tallant, this year's ten-week festival sets out to explore hospitality through the commissioning of permanent and temporary works of art, and community-based projects. Central to the theoretical framework of the biennial is *The Unexpected Guest*, an exhibition of works by over sixty artists presented across the city. Conceived as a means to develop a deeper knowledge of hospitality through interpretations of the theme that encompass colonial history, spatial politics and the ethics of the host-guest relationship, the exhibition is articulated most clearly and effectively in its temporary occupation of the Cunard Building, one of Liverpool's historic 'Three Graces'. Built in 1917, this waterfront site, the former headquarters of the world-famous steamship company, functioned until the 1960s as a passenger terminal for the transatlantic line. Serving as an architectural metaphor for the transitory nature of hospitality, for migration and the movement of people, the Cunard Building forms the heart of *The Unexpected Guest's* ambitious curatorial endeavour, with the exhibition occupying the two main halls and antechambers of the building's ground floor.

On arrival into the former departure hall, the viewer encounters rows of estate agent signage, hand-painted replicas of existing 'To Let' signs sourced from the abundant empty offices and commercial spaces in Liverpool's financial district, and suspended from the ceiling like bunting with their original location detailed on the reverse. Staged as a single installation by the Copenhagen-based artists' collective Superflex in response to the city's current socio-economic climate, these signs lend a melancholy feel to the sparsely occupied hall (Fig.78).

The majority of the works exhibited here are lens-based in medium, with installations of



78. Installation view, the Cunard Building, Liverpool, showing *Liverpool to let*, by Superflex. 2012. Mixed media, dimensions variable. (Commissioned by Liverpool Biennial).

video and photography visually punctuated by sculptural pieces by Mona Hatoum and Pamela Rosenkranz. The latter's contribution is *Bow human* (2012), a series of seven floor-based, mixed-media sculptures: semi-abstract, recognisably human forms shrouded in metallic gold and silver blankets. Their identities hidden, kneeling perhaps in shock or in prayer, they cluster on the outer edges of the hall alluding to the seeking of refuge and asylum. Hatoum's *Present tense* (1996; Fig.80) occupies a nearby office space. Born in Beirut in 1952, Hatoum settled in London in the mid-1970s after war broke out in Lebanon. Working across media, she travels extensively, creating works in direct response to specific geopolitical contexts. *Present tense* was originally created in Jerusalem on the occasion of the artist's first visit to the city in 1966. The piece comprises 2,400 bars of local Palestinian soap assembled together as a single grid measuring 299 by 241 cm. Placed directly on the floor, the work recalls the minimalist sculpture of Carl Andre, yet closer inspection reveals tiny red glass beads pressed into the waxy ivory-coloured surface of the soap. The

beads follow the contours of a map the artist found delineating the territories that were intended to be returned to Palestinian control after the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement with Israel. Hatoum's response to this problematic model of peace rendered in a local, domestic material encapsulates the transience of political borders and the promise of their dissolution. The individual works on view at the Cunard Building form just one component of the exhibition's discursive framework that includes multiple sites, talks and an anthology of newly commissioned writing.

Distinct from *The Unexpected Guest*, yet significant within the biennial's curatorial agenda, is a new public commission by the Los Angeles-based artist Doug Aitken. Situated on Liverpool's Albert Dock, *The source* (2012; Fig.79) is a multi-part video installation housed in a temporary pavilion designed by the artist together with the British architect David Adjaye. The circular pavilion presents six screens of videos projected inside by day and outwards by night. Their content is a series of filmed conversations between Aitken and eighteen so-called 'established creative



79. *Sky arts ignition: Doug Aitken – The source*, by Doug Aitken. 2012. Six-screen video projection, each 4 mins. (Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York; Gallerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles). Pavilion designed by David Adjaye and Doug Aitken. (Exh. Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool).



80. *Present tense*, by Mona Hatoum. 1996. Soap and glass beads, 4.5 by 299 by 241 cm. (Courtesy of the artist; exh. Liverpool Biennial).

individuals' including the artists Thomas Demand and the late Mike Kelley, the architect Jacques Herzog, and the actress Tilda Swinton. Avoiding distinctions between specialist fields, the films are structured around two key questions: where does the creative idea start, and how is it realised? The resulting dialogues are intensely edited, the simple act of talking becoming heavily stylised as conversations repeatedly return to similar themes. Each video has the same running time of four minutes. At any given moment the viewer encounters six conversations playing simultaneously. This effects a frustrating spectatorial situation in which the multiple dialogues begin to morph into one, into a cacophony of noise in which the participants' diverse takes on the complexities of creativity become one and the same. The limitations of this installation point to a problem at the core of this year's biennial.

The 7th Liverpool Biennial successfully examines the notion of hospitality from a multitude of trans-national perspectives and simultaneously engages on a local level with the city's history and contemporary status. Yet its success ultimately relies upon reciprocity, upon dialogue with the inhabitants of the city and its itinerant visitors. The biennial, like Aitken's pavilion, is intended as a platform for conversation, as a means to promote productive discussion beyond the actual works exhibited. But at times it feels as if the biennial loses sight of the public as an integral part of its composition.

¹ Catalogue: *The Unexpected Guest: Art, Writing and Thinking on Hospitality*. Edited by Sally Tallant and Paul Domela. 320 pp. incl. 243 col. + 65 b. & w. ill. (Art Books, London, 2012), £18.95. ISBN 978-1-908970-03-9.

Sarah Lucas

Leeds

by BRANDON TAYLOR

DURING THE 1990S, the British artists known as the YBAs were praised or vilified in surprisingly narrow terms. Beginning with *Young British Artists* at the Saatchi Gallery, London, from 1992, followed by *Brilliant!* in Minneapolis in 1995, and then at *Sensation* at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1997 before its transfer to New York in 1999, the loudest claim made by critics was for a nihilistic sensibility revolving around casual sex, tabloid headlines, cheap alcohol and take-away food. For a while, the critical telegraph wires buzzed excitedly with talk about the place of 'the popular' in high culture. One version of the commentary suggested that the YBAs felt themselves to be part of the common culture because their risks and pleasures were essentially the same; another, that no art could compete with the common culture since only the latter promised real experiences of abandonment and delight.¹ It became conventional to describe YBA work in terms that belonged to the artist rather than to the art – tawdry confessions (Tracey Emin), riffs on death and survival (Damien Hirst), the culture of the night club, the street or the pub; or in Sarah Lucas's case, the laddish world of page-three girls, masturbation and booze. In her case, the comment was often about class. 'Her appropriation of a young, working-class male's interest in violence, sex and alcohol was unapologetic', Martin Maloney wrote in the catalogue to *Sensation*. 'By adopting it she exposed it'.²

The recent exhibition at the **Henry Moore Institute, Leeds** (closed 21st October), by contrast, entitled *Sarah Lucas: Ordinary Things*, went at least some of the way towards showing Lucas to be a sculptor, as much as, if not more than, the sensationalist she was once claimed to be.³ A sculptor, that is, concerned with sculptural procedures and traditions, processes of making and assembling, the languages of material and form. In such a case, one might expect to find a hermeneutical method in which Lucas's low-culture references appear as something else entirely: a decoy, even; at most, a pretext for a fairly consistent style of play with sculptural technique, and without the addition of biography. The Leeds show confirmed that production values are central to the things Lucas likes to make. Expediency, slackness and humour – approximately – in the selecting and arrangement of fairly ordinary things is a posture in which happenstance is also often made to provide the key.

The show does not attempt to apply the rubric to all of Lucas's works. The *Fag* sculptures and the photographic productions, for instance, are both excluded. Certain early pieces including *Au naturel* (1994; Fig.83), with its sexualised fruit and vegetables

protruding from a makeshift bed, becomes sculptural in non-biographical terms in as much it 'lowers' objects to the level of an activity that is already low – in this case having sex on a dirty mattress on the floor. Yet the power of analogy is already clearly in play; or, if not analogy, then metaphor and metonymy, as in the placement of concrete-moulded army boots astride an upright six-foot neon pole in *The unknown soldier* (2003), in which war and sex are made to inhabit the same semantic space. And that casual play with language is surely what Lucas the sculptor does best. In the series she calls *NUDS* (2009–10), she takes the stuffed-tights method used in her earlier *Bunny* sculptures and raises it to a new level of sophisticated suggestiveness. Imagine Barbara Hepworth's polished wooden and marble forms folded in upon themselves, their holes filled with flesh-coloured limbs, forearms and goodness knows what other body-parts. Proper upstanding modernism is now translated into writhing, violent couplings; the hint of an elbow here, an anus there, legs and arms wrapped around each other in what remains, for all the scatology, an art-historically very knowing and respectful register (Fig.81). I have always thought that Lucas's earlier *Two fried eggs and a kebab* (1992) should be placed alongside a Henry Moore reclining figure, their body-postures being almost exactly the same; while *Beyond the pleasure principle* (2000) was always interesting less for its Freudian references than for its casual cleverness with a bucket, light bulbs, and neon tube penetrating a dark red futon. Slackness can be seen as



81. *NUD 26*, by Sarah Lucas. 2009. Tights, fluff, wire, breeze-blocks and MDF plinth, 100 by 43 by 43 cm. (Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ, London; exh. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).