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By Finn Smith

Curators talked a lot about the politics of place, identity and participation during Curating Post-Nation: Rethinking the Survey Exhibition for the Biennial Age, a symposium at Bristol's Arnolfini gallery this September. But are curatorial self-reflexivity and multiple exhibition sites enough to guarantee criticality?, asks Finn Smith

Having previously reviewed their book *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation* put together by the research and commissioning programme Situations, I thought it would be interesting to witness one of their live events. A trip to Bristol for the symposium Curating Post-Nation: Rethinking the Survey Exhibition for the Biennial Age was in order. As the symposium claimed to be questioning the model of the large scale show, it was timed perfectly to coincide with the final days of The British Art Show 6 (BAS6), thus providing an opportunity to check out an example of the format under debate. In fact, Situations even deemed the symposium to be an element of the show and not just a response, describing it as 'a part of Situations' contribution to British Art Show 6'. [1]

The British Art Show started in 1979 and takes place every five years. It is organised by Hayward Gallery Touring and claims to be 'the largest and most wide-ranging survey of recent developments in British art'. [2] Over the course of a year the show is presented in various city locations around Britain. In September 2005 BAS6, curated by Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker, began its tour in Gateshead at the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art. The show then emerged from its under-one-roof beginnings to travel to other cities where the work was distributed across multiple spaces and galleries: first in Manchester, then on to Nottingham, and finally ending up in Bristol this September.

In their exhibition guide, Farquharson and Schlieker highlight the diverse composition of the show's artists:

all [of the 50 artists and artists groups selected for BAS6] live in the UK, yet only about half are British. This reflects the dramatic internationalisation of the British art scene during the last five years, the period that this exhibition surveys. [3]

I have noticed in national newspaper reviews of BAS6 a nauseatingly triumphal tone, with critics praising its emphasis on 'internationalisation' as somehow indicative of Britain's importance as an art industry capital luring the world's 'creative talent' and exploiting it shrewdly. The curators of this show were clearly self-conscious about their participation in a survey. For instance, they acknowledged that biennials occur in order to 'harness the economic potential of a city' and that the 'British' survey label is merely a convenient marketing tool that they would prefer to drop. However, during the symposium they seemed to overlook current political circumstances which impinge directly on the whole question of a national cultural identity: the worrying introduction of nationhood tests, for example, and ever more aggressive media and ministerial calls for migrant assimilation. Arguably their celebration or 'reflection' of internationalisation could be seen as a deliberate and necessary reaction to these circumstances and a means by which to offer a zone of respite in which participation and political vocalisation is nurtured. But it seemed considerably more likely that rosy talk suggestive of borders falling might obscure the issues rather than offer a much needed interrogation of the power

relations that perpetuate the problems of cultural exclusion. It would be interesting to compare BAS6's approach with the forthcoming show at the ICA entitled Alien Nation. As reportedly 'the first project of its kind', this show, claims the ICA, will 'expose a disturbing contemporary narrative in which the media perpetuate a terror of 'invasion' from immigrants, asylum seekers (or any racial, cultural or ethnic 'other'), marking such 'outsiders' as the dominant threat to both family and national stability.' [4]

[IMAGE]

Image: *M-path* by Adam Chodzko

Multiculturalism and nationalism were not explicitly questioned at the symposium, yet agendas of 'social cohesion' appear to have indirectly informed BAS6. When looking into its funding for instance, I discovered that one of its backers, The Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, believes in the need 'to support and maintain a free, stable and socially cohesive society', and that such a society would be 'one in which enterprise is encouraged' [5] The foundation granted the Hayward Gallery £107,692 towards the cost of an advertising campaign for the show. It is a reminder that, however noble intentions appear to be, there are those attempting to define the terms of 'social cohesion' and promote vaguely defined economic models with arts practitioners participating along the way.

The Bristol leg of the tour was scattered between five sites. This was likened to an 'archipelago' by the curators during the Symposium presentations. The multi venue distribution of the show presumably arose partly out of necessity in terms of making use of the various spaces that were available in the city, and also through the ambition to engage with more of the city. Instead of the viewing experience merely involving a lazy stroll between each room via a corridor, for me it became a question of crossing roads, walking over a footbridge, trying to find somewhere to buy lunch and witnessing the police questioning a group of youths. Evidently perambulation through the city was important to the Hayward and Arnolfini. They even provided a colourful leaflet illustrating a Polaroid diary of a fictitious day out at the show stating 'our personal aim is to inspire people to go out and explore the British Art Show venues throughout Bristol'. I suspect the guide was pitched as an 'educational tool' for awakening the imagination of a young generation preconceived as apathetic. The anonymous diarist points out that fun can even be had without going near the work: 'the highlight of the day was taking a picture of a flying pigeon'. Adam Chodzko's work *M-path*, which offered visitors the opportunity to exchange shoes for a second hand-pair to experience 'the way you end up walking when you're in someone else's shoes', [6] became another unsubtle attempt at bringing home the idea of visitor fluidity within the city as a participatory and exploratory challenge. I began my meanderings around BAS6 at the Arnolfini gallery. A sign on one of the walls suggested turning on Bluetooth phones to receive sound works. I don't have a Bluetooth phone so I may well have missed out. Bluetooth seems to have become a fashionable tool for the delivery and creation of sound works. Just the other day I wandered past the PLAY event outside the Southbank Centre in London [www.play.philharmonia.co.uk] but again my lack of technological preparedness for such an encounter left me on the margins.

During the symposium discussion, Farquharson and Schlieker expressed their personal preference for the 'archipelago' multiple venue show over the 'continent' of the Baltic with the slightly whimsical declaration that this enabled the venues, with their different histories, to inflect the work with a sense of the surroundings. They also suggested that the array of venues created an exhibition balanced between the stark white cube and strictly context specific approaches. In practice however, I felt that situating art works in buildings such as the old A-bond warehouse was often a wasted opportunity in terms of displaying the work. This was because once inside the space looked like any other gallery, largely stripped of individuality, painted white and screened off, with much of the fabric and history obscured. However, this did produce also interesting results since the main difference between the

venues became not the interiors, but what lay outside. It had the effect of emphasising the walks and journeys between locations. A walk around the city would also potentially bring the visitor into direct contact with the issues that some of the artists were trying to highlight such as the privatisation of public space. A flash animation for instance, *The Art of Urbanomics* by Nils Norman, depicted a cartoon version of Charles Baudelaire undertaking a bizarre city journey. The piece served as a basic illustrated introduction to the processes of privatisation and artists' collusion in gentrification. It depicted, amongst other scenes, the adaptation of park benches to prevent the homeless sleeping on them before eventually being removed altogether.

[IMAGE]

Image: *M-path* by Adam Chodzko

The works in the show were wide ranging in terms of the media employed and ideas explored. According to the curators the political scope of the show is global too, particularly in the area of film, which features many works set in contexts commonly associated with conflict and upheaval. [7] Although of course the act of creation and/or distribution of work within sites of turmoil may be a significant political action in itself, the mere act of setting work somewhere associated with conflict and upheaval does not necessarily produce a successful political analysis or act of questioning. The curators also selected work apparently indicative of socially engaged practices, and projects that referenced subjects such as architecture, urban environments, landscape and ecology. To avoid accusations of star-making or supporting existing big names Farquharson and Schlieker admitted to the cautious action of deliberately focusing on artists from the 'middle ground'. This supposed mid-point artist was defined as one neither too old nor too young with significant exhibition experience - perhaps underground. This admission was typical of their attempts to curate a show that would take everything into consideration without risking offence.

The BAS6 website [8] has summaries of the 50 participating artists and artists groups, but be warned it is a bit of a Flash-based fairground with no obvious alternative HTML version. There is also a 'virtual gallery' named 'Showcases', devised by artist Goshka Macuga whose works 'often play host to the work of other artists' [9] and in doing so supposedly question authorship and the hierarchies of artistic values. In this project, the work of other artists being 'hosted' is that of visitors to the website who are invited to 'just get creative' with mobile phones and text in their camera phone photos. The selection for this virtual exhibition is regulated by the Hayward which 'reserves the right to choose which images are included in the virtual gallery'. The multitude of rules, terms and conditions for submission provide an unintentional parallel to the health and safety regulations artists and curators often claim they have to endure when putting together a show. Such regulatory hindrances were discussed by Whitney Biennial 2004 and 2006 co-curator Chrissie Iles at the symposium. At a time when corporate managed, user-generated content sites coated in adverts, such as MySpace and YouTube, are enabling easy exhibition of videos, images and sounds without fee, this virtual gallery charging per message is presumably reliant on participants desire to have their work given elevated status through its association with an art institution.

The symposium itself took place at the Arnolfini Gallery and the accompanying information pack explained:

This symposium will explore the structure of national survey exhibitions, their potential to reflect on new tendencies in contemporary art and to produce dynamic contexts for the consideration of artists living or working within a defined geographic area.

According to Claire Doherty, the symposium moderator, the speakers would not simply critique the British Art Show 6 but would more generally interrogate the show's model and place it in an international context. The symposium would hopefully be propositional and experimental. The title 'Post-Nation' was seen as a provocative starting point and was not about taking a particular position. This admission was slightly disappointing and as the symposium progressed it became clear that the title was not going to provoke substantial debate.

The first presentation was from Farquharson and Schlieker. Rather than focusing on ways to rethink the survey exhibition and question the potential for the future development of biennial curating, they concentrated heavily on reviewing the decisions that they had made when approaching and developing the BAS6. While this was interesting and evidently gave an insight into the process of constructing the show, it did not offer a significant challenge to the issues raised by Doherty. Farquharson and Schlieker proceeded to outline the history of the show and concentrated largely on describing the manner in which the tour moved nationally. They reiterated the general message of the exhibition guide - that the show evolved and reinvented itself in response to the changing local situations, while some works even considered the nature of the exhibition itself. The accumulative project of Carey Young entitled *Win Win* was presumably an example of the latter. BAS6 curators and Hayward staff were involved in a training course designed to resolve 'conflict' and 'the work is exhibited as documentation of the event', and will continue to exist conceptually whenever the newly acquired skills are put to use. The residual documentation of the event consisted of A4 report sheets, pinned to the wall, filled out by participants roughly detailing how they had used their new skills. These documents were presented opposite a monitor playing a video of the training day itself, with the sound barely audible. The understated even dull presentation of the documentation, rather than clearly placing importance on specific moments when an idea had influenced curatorial decision making, had the effect of turning the work into a private in-joke. As such it gave an interesting insight into the interaction between curators, gallery staff and artists.

[IMAGE]

Image: *Win Win* by Carey Young

From the symposium speeches it became clear that the BAS6 was highly considered, with incredible attention given to details and that the curators wanted to demonstrate a multitude of interdisciplinary interests. It also became evident that via the actual symposium the curators wished to highlight that they were acutely aware of the limitations of the show's model. They stated that they did not reject the idea of a survey as a starting point because they felt that, as the only show of its scale with a five year review period, it could actually enable trends to be discernible. Presumably though, if they had rejected the idea of a survey they would not have been asked to curate the show. They explained that it was the Hayward that mediated relationships with host cities and logistically enabled it to take place and acknowledged that projects outside of the gallery walls were only possible with institutional support and funding. Farquharson explained that although many of the works in the show were not exactly attempting 'institutional critique', they were instead trying to make interventions and 'expect more of us', whatever that might mean.

Doherty made the observation that large scale biennials largely avoid any overall thematic and instead have become increasingly place specific leading to more commissions supposedly considerate of local conditions. Interestingly when Doherty questioned Farquharson and Schlieker over their level of collaboration with participating venues the curators explained that, as a survey show, they felt that the process was less about collaboration with venues and more an authorial activity on their part. The British Council has a statement on its website, which identifies an overall tendency:

The number of international contemporary art biennials and survey exhibitions has proliferated over recent decades. Each has a distinct focus, dictated in part by its geographic location but increasingly by its artistic direction, the tendency being to move away from selection solely by nationality towards selection by curatorial theme.

Shows like BAS6, by making such marked mention of the internationalisation of the art scene, ensure the issue of nationality becomes the theme.

On the second day of the symposium, curator Chrissie Iles described the process of curating the Whitney Biennial. This provided a fascinating insight into specific curatorial approaches but it did not really address the symposium questions. Iles ultimately admitted that she felt that true institutional critique was not possible but nonetheless spoke in slightly self-congratulatory tones whilst showing images of the controversial works she had managed to incorporate in the Whitney Biennial without being sacked.

Hans Ulrich-Obrist was unable to attend in person but sent in his place a DVD presentation of his musings, apparently filmed in a busy airport. I don't know if it was just me and my poor note-taking skills but I found the sound quality too scrappy to be able to hear exactly what the main gist of the performance was. I look forward to reviewing his comments when transcripts of the symposium appear on [www.situations.org.uk], as it was a shame to miss his take on the *Uncertain States of America* survey which toured to the Serpentine Gallery. Like the other curators he seemed to be openly acknowledging the act of curating as primarily an authorial process and not simply one of review. I also caught reference to the good old 'archipelago' model again.

Nina Muntmann's talk was interesting in terms of detailing the ways in which public art institutions have been pressed into conforming to corporate business models. In discussing and lamenting the problems of large institutions, constrained by the requirement of achieving large visitor numbers and increasingly pushed into becoming mere outlets for merchandise, she identified a need to support the emergence of free, unbranded spaces that could for instance offer a critique of the nation state. Muntmann suggested that learning from the global south, where a lack of access to institutions has often given rise to community activities, could help facilitate the development of emancipatory and repoliticised environments for art and public participation. Despite such talk she was vague about the actual technical practicalities involved in creating 'new social spaces', how to resolve funding issues, or how observing the actions of the global south could avoid merely poaching ingenuity from those who have often had to devise methods of survival in the face of western exploitation. It was also not clear how 'progressive' and 'flexible' institutions, if they even exist or can be created, can be more than simply pragmatic and opportunistic.

Neil Mulholland stated that there is fuzziness around definitions of globalisation and emphasised that the mobility of artists is not new. He importantly dispelled any romantic notions of artists leading a borderless existence free from states and laws. He also stated that globalisation is not necessarily the enemy of the nation state and that attention to the local in much art practice has been pitched as a kind of 'lingua franca'. Focus on what makes locality different, he explained, is also attractive to capital.

Unfortunately the panel discussion that followed the talks was limited, but this was possibly due to time restrictions and the unfortunate absences of Mark Godfrey and Ralph Rugoff. It appeared, however, as if the parties were trying not to offend each other. As a result the symposium title of 'Post-Nation' was not really tested with Iles declaring that it was merely a tool to instigate discussion 'as we will never get rid of borders'. Nina Muntmann seemed to suggest that a form of transnational umbrella organisation that could facilitate the development of projects for smaller groups would be desirable, but to what purpose and under what funding conditions was again unclear. There was also

little debate about the success of attempts to introduce a dynamic and changing element to BAS6 and shows of a similar model, which was odd given the fact that the first day of the symposium had concluded with outdoor performances. The issue of exhibition education did however start to provoke debate. When Farquharson described it as top down and weak, Doherty disagreed and defended it, claiming that BAS6 had not sufficiently embedded collaboration into their model. In response Farquharson acknowledged that the Situations symposium had been the only significant chance for public debate and he hoped to see money set aside for similar events in the future. In many ways however, the symposium was peripheral to the free entry show as it was accompanied by a relatively expensive entrance fee.

It is possible to see parallels between the rhetoric of multiculturalism, which neglects to challenge the political and economic structures that sustain racist exploitation, and the faith of participants in institutions (self declared new-institutions or otherwise) where approaches based on the survey and the nation can be faintly decried yet involvement is not severed. The flaws in both might be evident but they are equally hard to abandon, particularly when alternative courses of action are not easily identifiable and when the intentions of individuals are often well-meant. Much recent discussion is currently dividing institutional critique into phases [see: <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106>] and demands are being made for new gestures to emerge and for institutions to make good on, defend and rethink their inflexible mechanics. Farquharson claimed at one point that he wanted biennials to become even more self-reflexive. I suspect that the age of the acutely self-conscious institution, rather than the critical, is upon us.

[1] Curating Post-Nation: Rethinking the Survey Exhibition. for the Biennial Age, Symposium Information Pack.

[2] BAS6 Exhibition Guide.

[3] Ibid.

[4] <http://www.ica.org.uk>

[5] <http://www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk>

[6] <http://www.adamchodzko.com>

[7] BAS6 Exhibition Guide.

[8] <http://www.hayward.org.uk/britishartshow6>

[9] Ibid

Curating Post-Nation: Rethinking the Survey Exhibition for the Biennial Age, took place on 15-16 September, Arnolfini, Bristol:

http://www.situations.org.uk/projects_britishartshow_symposium.htm

The British Art Show 6 was in Bristol from 15 July to 17 September:

<http://www.hayward.org.uk/britishartshow6/>