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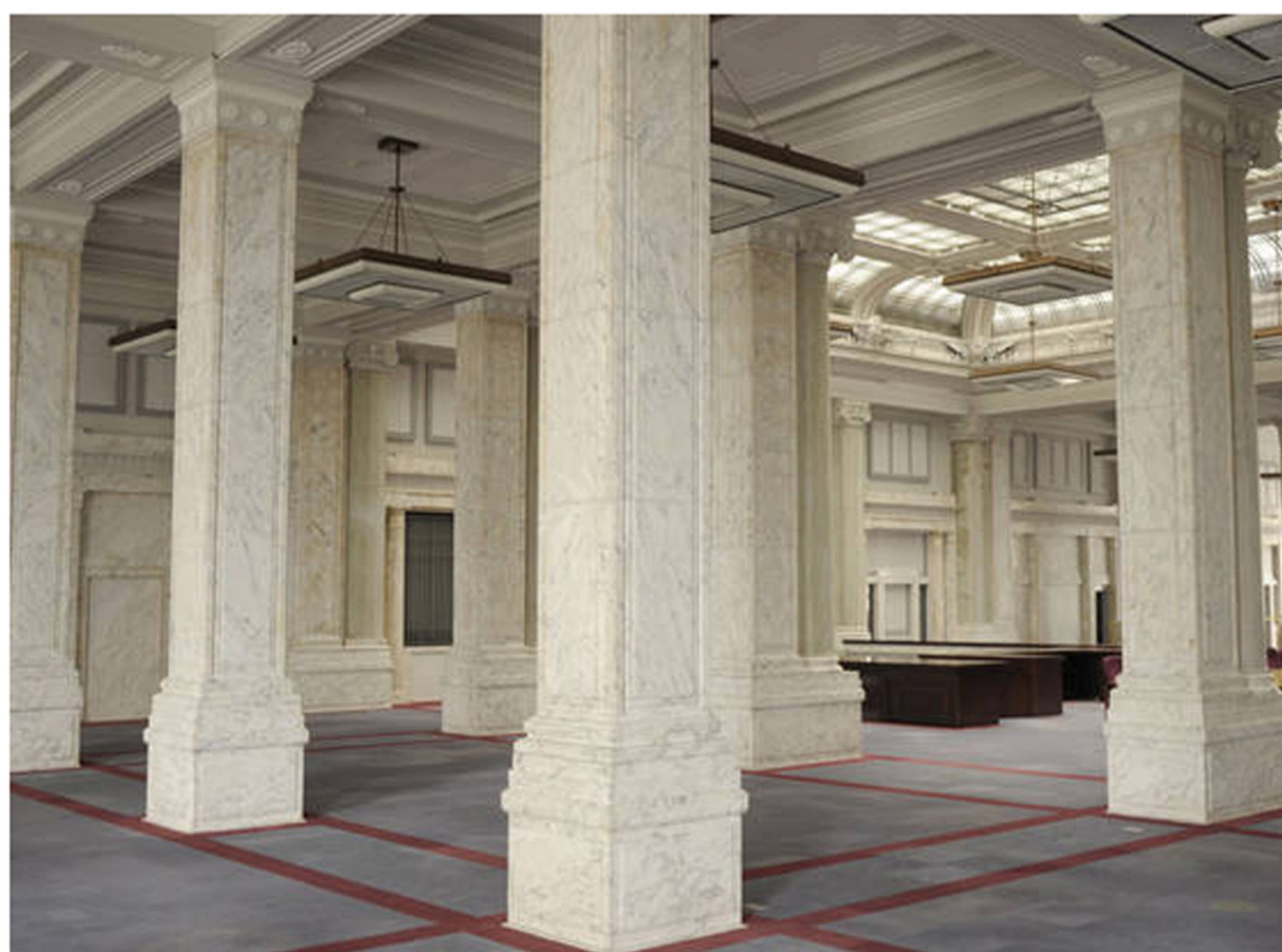
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Liverpool Biennial 2012



Posted: 21 September 2012 by Sam Phillips

The UK's most important contemporary art festival kicked off last weekend in Liverpool. Comprised of group exhibitions and specially commissioned site-specific projects across the city, this year's Liverpool Biennial – now in its seventh edition and led by a new director, Sally Tallant, formerly of London's Serpentine Gallery – has seen a variety of interesting venues open to the public in the name of art.



The Cunard Building before installation. Copyright: Ed Park.

The most notable of these is the neo-classical Cunard Building, one of the city's famous 'Three Graces', situated between the Port of Liverpool Building and the Royal Liver Building. After its completion in 1917 the building served as the terminal for the Cunard Steamship Company. Now home to various private and public organisations, it's a structure that is as impressive inside as out, its interior dominated by marble columns.

The Cunard is one of the main sites for the festival's overarching group exhibition 'The Unexpected Guest', which examines the biennial's theme of 'hospitality'. One of the most memorable works was an installation of suspended banner signs between the aforementioned columns, hand-painted by Danish artist group Superflex as copies of the ubiquitous 'to let' signs around the city. Another was a five-screen video installation *Speeches* (2012) by French artist Sylvie Blocher. Each screen in turn shows a performer reciting a political speech, from a rapped version of the Communist Manifesto to a guitar-accompanied rendition of Obama's acceptance speech, all eulogies for different Utopian dreams. But what, if anything, many of the works had to do with hospitality was unclear to me – as is often the case in art festivals, the choice of a single theme for the entire event felt forced.



'Superflex Liverpool To Let', 2012. Image: Jerry Hardman-Jones.

The quality of the work at the biennial was rather up and down, from what pieces I could engage with during a day trip. A big disappointment was a video installation by Californian-born artist Doug Aitken by Tate Liverpool and Sky Arts, *The Source* (2012). Aitken interviewed eighteen significant artistic figures – including musicians Jack White and Beck, artists Mike Kelley and Philippe Parreno, and photographers Steven Shore and William Eggleston – about the nature of creativity. Snippets of these interviews are projected screens within a temporary pavilion next to the Tate, a structure designed in collaboration with British architect David Adjaye. Unfortunately Aitken as artist-turned-interviewer does a job of which any broadcaster would be ashamed: edited down to four minute chunks, the interviews lack compelling content, the interviewees' remarks either commonplace or too obscure to follow.

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Doug Aitken, 'Sky Arts Ignition: Doug Aitken - The Source 2012'. Installation view outside Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool.

Better is the free-entry group exhibition at the Tate, 'Thresholds', taken from the Tate Collection, whose highlights include some strong works by British painters Hurvin Anderson and George Shaw, Sophie Calle's seminal 1981 series 'The Hotel' – in which the French artist photographs and writes about the contents of people's hotel rooms, having posed as a chambermaid – and an installation of holiday snaps by Hong Kong-based Pak Sheung Chuen; the twist is that his photographs are shown in a darkened room, which you can only light up momentarily with the flash of a camera provided by the gallery assistant.

Another darkened room can be explored at the nearby Open Eye Gallery. By torchlight one views an infamous series by Japanese photographer Kohei Yoshiyuki, 'The Park' (1979), which shows couples having sex at night in Chuo Park in Tokyo. The subject, however, is less the couples but the spectators who came to watch, and the gallery visitors themselves, who becomes voyeurs, torches in hand like those lurking in the bushes in the park.

On the exterior of the gallery – an absolute contrast to the sinister experience of the dark room – is a geometric vinyl wall work by British artist Sinta Tantra, a past graduate of the RA Schools. If you've been to Canary Wharf station recently, you may have seen Tantra's work on the railway bridge. Alluring in colour and texture, her Open Eye piece, entitled *Together, Yet Forever Apart*, both complements the angular architecture of the site and transports the imagination to more idyllic places than Liverpool's post-industrial city centre.



Hurvin Anderson, 'Jersey', 2008. Oil on canvas. 1800 x 2500 mm. © Hurvin Anderson



Sinta Tantra, 'Together, Yet Forever Apart', 2012. Commissioned by Open Eye Gallery for Liverpool Biennial 2012: 'The Unexpected Guest'. Photograph: Mark McNulty.

The biennial also encompasses regular highlights of the city's art calendar, such as the John Moore Painting Prize at the Walker Art Gallery (won by RA Schools Alumni Sarah Pickstone, the first woman to have won it since Lisa Milroy in 1989) and Bloomberg New Contemporaries – the annual best-of-the-bunch graduate show – staged at the LJMU Coppers Hill Building. The latter is a mammoth warehouse-style space that until recently had been a postal sorting office, and upstairs is one of the biennial's major elements, 'City States', in which artists and curators active in 13 cities, from Oslo to Taipei, display distinct mini-exhibitions. There was plenty to see, although not much stood out. Gdnask's contribution was my favourite, featuring works that included an interesting film about Polish jewellery by Yael Bartana, previously shown in the Polish Pavilion in the last Venice Biennale, and a photograph series by Alicja Karska and Aleksandra Went that shows a bright-white urban sprawl, formed out of sugar, slowly melting into mud.

If you have time, I highly recommend joining one of the weekly 'Anfield Home Tours', which are affiliated to a particularly inspiring community art project. Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk has worked with the