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## Baltic interventions

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# Baltic Interventions

by Bill Leeming

Baltic, a resurrected flour mill-cum-art museum, finally opened its doors to the public July 12, in Gateshead, on the banks of the River Tyne in the North of England. Ten years ago Gateshead Council decided that arts and culture provided a key to a regeneration strategy which included a new tilting bridge (£22 million, or CAD\$56 million), a new music centre designed by Sir Norman Foster (£70 million, or CAD\$173 million), and outdoor sculptures, most notably Anthony Gormley's fifty-four-metre wingspan *Angel of the North* (1997). To some observers, it follows Manchester's Lowry as the latest ray of sunshine in a torrent of architectural glory raining down on British art institutions after the long cultural winter brought about by Thatcherism. To others, Baltic is simply the latest make-over for New Labour's limp culture industry.

Let us not forget that arts and culture have long been viewed in the UK as a kind of life raft upon which to set about saving the country's decaying industrial cities. After Margaret Thatcher swept to power in 1979, the radical right pushed through monetarist policies that resulted in a downsizing of the manufacturing sector in favour of service industries. Under the banner of "value for money," however, it was made perfectly clear that future growth of the arts would henceforth be met from the private sector. Arts administration simultaneously became a marketing exercise and a post-secondary degree subject. Arts administrators no longer saw the provision of art to the public as a moral duty. They abandoned the nineteenth century arts policies that linked "civilization" and "culture," as well as programmes to "educate" and "instruct," in order to nurture the "cultural health" of the masses. In order to curry favour with the state, they recast themselves as literal captains of the arts industry, focusing on the



Baltic. Photo: the author.

market by way of spectator events and tourism. In 1982, the Conservatives lumped the "arts" with "heritage," "sport," "film" and "tourism" in the department of national heritage. In 1997, New Labour renamed this arrangement the department of culture, media and sport. This is what has guided the regeneration of the Mersey waterfront and the planned redevelopment of Liverpool as the "Bilbao of Britain." Similar cultural facelifts have occurred in other cities of the North — Sheffield, Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester. Contemporary city plans now accommodate the renovation and building of galleries and theatres alongside new construction on sports stadiums, indoor shopping complexes and historic properties.

It might appear churlish not to ask whether these policies have improved public access to the arts. It is certainly the case that Tony Blair's



Baltic. Photo: the author.



Baltic. Photo: the author.

government has reduced pressures on museums and galleries to charge admission fees, thus restoring the long-standing tradition of free museum entry in Britain, curtailed by the Conservatives in the 1980s. Since 2000, admission to many major museums has become free again, and attendance has skyrocketed with an average annual increase of ninety-six percent. But freer access to the arts is not all that matters. There are corresponding questions about whether the quality of the experience is enhanced. In the absence of dealers and local commercial markets, this doesn't appear to be about enhancing the culture of the North. So-called Brit Art originates in the south. The London scene has bred a kind of spectacular work that fits the international art market well enough, but which may not suit northern audiences. Northerners appear to be attracted by exhibitions that represent local life rather than the cosmopolitanism of the south. They seem to want art that reflects the authority of regionally dominant cultural themes. At least, this is the impression one gets from watching and listening to local visitors to Baltic.

Gateshead's Baltic is best approached from the Newcastle side of the River Tyne, crossing the new Millennium Bridge. If you cross the Tyne Bridge, and follow Oakwellgate to South Shore Road, you quickly encounter telltale signs of economic failure and what J. B. Priestly once dismissed as a town that appeared to have been invented by "an enemy of the human race." But little remains of the original Baltic Flour Mills, a grain warehouse disused since the 1950s and left to stand, dark and foreboding, on the south bank. The mills have been transformed by a £46 million (CAD \$173 million) makeover, and, in July, locals and tourists alike were greeted with a huge exterior mural featuring Japanese performance artist Tatsumi Orimoto — with bread tied to his head and arms — draped around the shoulders of an apparently bemused woman with a shopping bag (actually his mother who has Alzheimer's disease). A procession of "breadmen," along with a two-day bread-making performance by artist Anne Bjerger Hansen, culminating each afternoon with the distribution of bags of freshly baked bread, heralded the transformation of the flour mill into what its director, Sune Nordgren, has called an "art factory bringing artists from all over the world to the North East of England, to exhibit and work in-residence in Baltic." In the words of the architect, Dominic Williams, the building is still primarily a store, but its stores have changed from flour to art.

On a busy day, Baltic sounds like a factory as the sound of shoes striking metal echoes up and down the staircases. The inaugural exhibits included things one might expect; a pastiche of neoconservative versions of postmodernism. Julian Opie's giant drawings were reminiscent of Gormley's monumental, faceless figures. They were drawn on windows, walls and floors with the same vinyl tape used in school gymnasiums. Children ran around the studio following the lines on the floor, only to be stopped in amazement before gigantic stylized genitals. Visitors were quite delighted by Jaume Plensa's nine pairs of large gongs and mallets suspended from the studio ceiling (*Installation*, 1998-2002). Each pair was labeled with the polarities of eighteenth-century natural philosophy: air-earth, chaos-saliva, semen-blood, etc.,

supplemented with plastic benches imprinted with excerpts from Blake's *The Proverbs of Hell*. Audience participation was invited, but participants who struck the gongs too vigorously were accosted by gallery staff. Viewers showed less enthusiasm for Carsten Höller's cage of 186 cold-cathode tubes, *Neon Circle* (2001). Each tube rapidly turned on and off, giving the impression of a spinning wheel. But you had to get on your knees to obtain the full effect.

Newcastle-born artists Jane and Louise Wilson's 35mm film installation *Dreamtime* (2001), documenting the launch of the International Space Rocket at Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, was breathtaking. American artist Chris Burden received high praise with his scale model of Tyne Bridge in Meccano and Erector Set parts. Burden's *Tyne Bridge* (2002) is one-twentieth of the size of the original, and painted to match the real thing — which is visible through the glazed west facade of the gallery. Not only were viewers greatly enthused about the model, they pored over the pattern drawings and source manuals from Meccano (circa 1919). In contrast, disappointment was clearly visible on the faces of gallerygoers viewing Alec Finlay's two collaborative projects, *Football Haiku* (2001) and *Labanotation: the Archie Gemill Goal* (2001). The latter piece featured Rudolf Laban's system of notation ("Labanotation"), which facilitates the recording, analysis, and re-enactment of episodes of motion. This was used to break down and sequence Archie Gemmill's physical movements during the winning goal in the 1978 Scotland vs Holland World Cup game. The motion scores were subsequently choreographed and workshopped with dancers and school children. The photographs of dancer Andy Howitt on display at Baltic, however, failed to convey any vitality or enthusiasm, appearing somehow austere and disconnected from the local fascination with "footie." Howitt's re-enactment of Gemmill's air-punch, for instance, looked more like the fascist salute of a sculpture by Josef Thorak or Arno Breker than the victory dance of a beloved sports star.

The relative success of each piece can be determined by consideration of a holistic vision of individual and cultural integration at the local

level. The overall effect was certainly in keeping with the state's prime directive for the arts to be driven in the direction of whatever a mass electorate demands, or rather is thought to demand. But it seems to me more important questions are raised about the thorny relationships underlying cultural inclusion, social identity and community.

Some useful lessons can be drawn from a comparison with Manchester's Lowry. In contrast to Baltic, the Lowry Centre in Salford Quays — consisting of galleries, theatres, shops, restaurants and bars — eschews what may be perceived as the pernicious elitism of high culture. Built at a cost of £96-million (CAD\$138 million), the complex was partially funded by Britain's national lottery and other agencies such as Salford University, North West Water and the European Regional Development Fund. The galleries feature a permanent collection of over 300 paintings and drawings by Laurence Stephen Lowry, who depicted life in the industrial districts of Manchester and Salford until his death in 1976. Largely an untutored artist, Lowry's romanticized view of the industrial North promulgated ideas of traditional British communities struggling on in the face of social change. These ideas, of course, emerged with the Artists International Association and the Euston Road School of the 1930s. Raymond Williams's notion of "knowable communities" enters here, the notion of constellations of local solidarity and strategically localized actions functioning as a counterforce to the destructive effects of war and modernization.

There is no question that Manchester and the surrounding districts were terribly affected by the decline of regional manufacturing industries and by massive rebuilding strategies in the decades following 1945. Indeed, by 1980 there remained a mere 600 companies out of the several thousand that had been based in the region during the war. Unemployment levels increased in increments and the people fared badly during the periods of recession since 1980. But there are changes aside from the economics that need to be considered here. I would argue that the idea of a singular community orientation became a reification. I am thinking specifically about the richness of

cultural diversity that came with postwar immigration. In Greater Manchester today, nearly eight percent of families include individuals born in a Commonwealth country. The mix is decidedly multicultural with a presence visibly seen in community living patterns. Most of Manchester's West Indian households, for example, live in the Moss Side area. Longsight, by comparison, has the largest concentration of Asian families. Each successive influx of immigration from outside of the region has created a distinctive cultural base. As such, new challenges have arisen to what has "traditionally" suppressed or devalued the communities of *others*. A new dynamic relationship of contradiction and combination now informs a field of possible strategies for confronting issues of cultural inclusion, social identity and community.

Placed side by side in the context of cultural diversity, the goals and ambitions of the Lowry and Baltic are separable on at least two levels: The first pertains to the proliferation of pluralist views of a contemporary, "globalizing" culture, the second to the separation of "contemporary" culture from "traditional" culture. As distinct from earlier times, contemporary cultural production may appear to have, first, incorporated a single, totalizing definition of culture to express its "worldliness," and, second, a disaggregating effect, having passed a threshold (*limen*) that detaches and separates it from the communality (*gemeinschaft*) of earlier cultural production. Indeed, the openness, contextual nature and eventful processes that inform the notion of a shared cultural experience have fostered, under the auspices of Blair and company, a sense of a progressively tighter figuration with increasingly rapid flows of money, public resources and cultural goods. Barriers that once seemed to separate cultures and communities now seem penetrable as, increasingly, cultural goods pass from one site to another. These cultural goods, at one time regarded as strange, distant or even exotic, now can be made to fit in local circumstances — and are even desirable. Cultural consumption in the UK appears to operate in an even and yet somehow differentiated playing field, not needing a live connection with a particular community but rather,



The Lowry at Salford Quays. Photo: the author.

a sense of communal life in the progress of which we are implicated. Thus, an American artist, divested of the connection with Arnoldian high culture, can replicate a local landmark like the Tyne Bridge in Meccano pieces and apparently close cultural distance between nations. Therein, however, lies a major stumbling block.

Clearly the discourse changes when the consumer of cultural productions is regarded in terms of community and ceases to be defined solely in terms of economic relations. The problem, I believe, runs deeper than simply biasing cultural production and distribution toward one group, or excluding others. It strikes at core matters of conceptualization. Even

when not recognized or acknowledged, questions of degrees of cultural inclusion, as well as of cultural significance, all depend upon some notion of totality and the interpretation of the relations of parts to wholes. But parsimonious local solidarity and strategically localized action, in the context of national heritage, can bring so-called worldliness back together with the cultural narcissism against which it was marshalled. There remains the risk of attaching primary importance to particular types of ordered social existence.

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