

# Lewis Biggs

Since November 2000, Lewis Biggs has been Artistic Director of Liverpool Biennial festival, and Chief Executive of Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art Ltd – where he was a founding trustee in 1998. With the success of the 2002 festival, Liverpool Biennial was established as the UK's Biennial.

Lewis has had an extensive career in the visual arts spanning over 30 years. He has taken up a number of senior posts at leading arts institutions including Tate Liverpool, where he was the Director from 1999-2000. Lewis has sat on a number of high profile panels including Arts Council England's Arts Panel and the Visual Arts Advisory committee at the British Council. He has also been directly and indirectly responsible for many exhibitions and publications in his time.

In addition to Lewis's current role at the Liverpool Biennial, he is Visiting Professor of Contemporary Art and an Honorary Fellow of Liverpool John Moores University.



## Visual Arts in the City

Right now my son is 20. In 2020, when he's 30, what access will he have to 'subsidised' art? An even larger proportion of the population will live alone, won't know how to cook for themselves (one in five households currently doesn't own a cooker) and will download around eight hours of infotainment a day through a screen. Social networking through IT, then as now, will supplement rather than replace face-to-face interaction. My guess is that my son and his friends will still gather three or four nights a week, cramming into tiny apartments, or meeting in cafes and bars. The smart arts organisations will be those that support networking by providing 'public' space in which informal groups of friends feel comfortable hanging out in a creative way – on the model of the cabaret cafe. These organisations will no longer offer 'learning' or 'participation', but provide a sexy environment for sub-cultures to self-generate alongside, maybe in opposition to, the lead billing. They will, of course, be a minority, then as now: most culture will be either without subsidy, or subsidised – as marketing – by a commercial company.

Open-ended 'subsidy' is being replaced by investment against specific targets. The era of state subsidy lasted approximately two generations; we're now returning to the historically normal system of state patronage. But investment in visual arts by the public purse is unlikely to diminish, for reasons I suggest below.

The most pronounced changes that will have occurred in society will be of degree rather than of kind – a more pronounced gap between those that have and those that don't: the rich and poor, the educated and the less educated, the healthy and the less healthy; those with 'current' technology and those without; those who identify with the political classes and those who see these classes as the enemy; the shrinking minority that sees itself as citizens (and votes) and the large majority that doesn't. Those who have their habits challenged by their continuing experience of changing reality and social diversity, and those who by their own choice or by poverty are trapped in a stultifyingly uniform, probably suburban, culture; those whose creativity finds outlets, and those whose creativity has been suppressed for the greater success of consumerism in a retail society. Those who help themselves and those who are still waiting for help.

There will always be middle ground, by definition, but the once plump heart of the Bell Curve is getting slimmer and its skirts are extending.

### **The look and feel of the city**

Nothing – not even the wavering price of commercial property – is going to stop the conversion of existing urban streetscape into non-places, and the construction of new suburban or ‘out of town’ non-places. As market allegiance continues to switch from small and family high street businesses to large and multinational chains, the visual environment of city centres and urban villages will continue to deteriorate into anonymous bland homogeneity.

But the quality of our urban environment matters – probably a great deal more than the quality of our natural environment. Not only at the extremes, where children schooled in boarded-up streets are more than likely to want to return the violence done to them by society, but also in the middle run of life, in our ability to act humanely to one another when our paths cross on the street. Style and diversity in buildings, and even more in the planning of city open spaces, produces character at the least, and at best may also be productive of ‘quality’.

The ambition to have quality in the urban environment is not mainly a question of money, or of efficiency, but of pride. Our corporate, risk-averse culture is not conducive to pride in quality; an entrepreneurial culture is a great deal more so. The 1920s skyscrapers of Manhattan and those of Shanghai today are generous evidence of entrepreneurial pride in style diversity. With our massive load of public debt driving government to reach into every fiscal corner, it’s unlikely that the next decade will favour entrepreneurialism, creativity or pride. It’s more likely we’ll see corporate meanness of spirit extending its grip – that the opportunity will be taken to dispense even further with pride and generosity, along with pension funds.

Ironically, our political class has realised that pride, diversity, style, an attractive visual environment and quality of urban life are key to inward investment and competitiveness in cities. So it’s my prediction that those cities with a strong and aware political class will continue to prioritise state investment in cultural identity through commissioning visual art while cities dependent on direct corporate support won’t be able to (except maybe for “single industry” cities).

## The policy environment

In my list of “haves” and “have nots” above, maybe the most significant is that of the political class versus those without voice or influence in government. Over the last 20 years, political leadership in the UK has given place to managerial “government by focus group”. The political class (business people, consultants, media representatives, lobbyists etc) no longer functions in the adversarial way formerly associated with “western democracy”. It’s been ‘bought’ by (or convinced that its interests are co-extensive with those of) government and enlisted directly in the management of society and the state. The full effects of this will become apparent in the next decade.

Three instances, each in its way critical to cultural life, demonstrate the co-option of this class by government. Arts Council England (ACE) was created to ensure that government investment in culture should be “at arm’s length”, with art-lovers who were also pre-eminent in some other field appointed to administer that investment. ACE’s implementation of government policy is now seamless. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was set up to assess the needs of research institutions and to direct government investment accordingly. HEFCE now implements government policy regardless of the needs of those it once “represented”. The National Lottery was initially marketed by the Major government as a means to create additional income streams largely for social needs at “grass roots”. Successive governments abandoned the pretence of “bottom-up” initiative in favour of investment in government priorities.

Co-operation between government and the political class will increase. It’s driven by the benefits available to party members in single party states, but also by fear of unrest resulting from the ongoing “de-citizenizing” and disenfranchisement of the majority (the unrest evidenced by young Muslims, for instance). It’s likely that government will also increasingly look to China, as it habitually looked to the USA during the “American century”. Convergence is apparent between the Chinese system (government owned capitalism in one country) and the UK’s (multinational capitalism under highly centralised and increasingly close government management - in most aspects other than banking). The Chinese system is more effective economically, both in providing growth and protection from “boom and bust”. Recent UK legislation on terrorism and migration, for example, has emerged from the co-operation of the political class with government to suppress civil liberties in return for a comfortable deal, in terms of bread and circuses, for the majority.

Cultural provision in China is the product of a unique situation. This will not prevent other states emulating it. Official delegations from UK cities to China have been shocked to find that the Chinese want to discuss culture (the arts, sport) before business. Chinese real estate developers frequently use culture to market their hotels, shopping centres etc. They also use profitability in mass popular consumption to offset small volume in the retail of quality products for a social elite. The world's coming economic superpower is in no doubt of the central importance of investment in culture and the arts, and, so long as it has the desire to compete internationally, the UK will follow.

### **Visual arts in the city**

The pressure on arts organisations receiving state investment to meet their targets (in tourism, creative industry incubation, regeneration etc) will require them to converge and integrate with other “lifestyle” providers (retail, food, sport, fitness, leisure). Museums will become leisure centres 24/7, retail and social hubs offering an environment for non-stop small-scale self-organised events. And conversely, leading retailers, restaurants etc will stage events and commission artworks – as some do already – in a bid to associate their brand with creativity, culture and counter-culture/cultural difference. The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufactures and Commerce's (RSA) discussion evenings at Starbucks in the last couple of years are a straw in the wind. The number of large-scale visual arts events in the UK has mushroomed in the past decade, and will continue to do so. It's unclear what proportion of the population will be able to afford to participate in culture; but driven by our national debt, our managers are likely to agree with those of China that it's easier to dispense with social equality than the support of the political class.

*This essay does not reflect the views of the Liverpool Biennial.*