Haul away: Liverpool's irregular currents

Bryan Biggs

Bryan Biggs is the artistic director of Bluecoat, Liverpool's centre for the contemporary arts, where since the 1980s he has curated numerous exhibitions and events at the intersection of the contemporary visual arts, performance, literature and music. In the following text, he explores the particular position and history of Liverpool through the prism of its late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century artistic imaginaries. Between the memories of the slave trade and a deindustrialization process that engulfed the port's former economic prosperity, an estranged hinterland and an unbound river, artists in Liverpool constructed an alternate poetic space in the late twentieth century. Biggs sees these as so many paths through which to articulate an alternative relation to the world beyond, and within. In being tuned to alternate frequencies as they rise from the unknown self as much as the familiar outsider, Liverpool maritime poetics suggest a different mode of envisioning our interconnected presents

The Mersey's cultural flows

Flowing from its Lancashire hinterland, taking ships out into the Irish Sea and beyond to the Atlantic Ocean, the River Mersey is synonymous with Liverpool. The land on both of its banks is known as Merseyside. The river lent its name to two cultural flowerings in the 1960s: first, 'Merseybeat' was used to describe the distinctive sound of groups, notably The Beatles, which flourished at the start of the decade, taking their American rhythm & blues-inspired music from the city's cellar clubs onto a national, and then global stage. This was followed by *The Mersey Sound* (1967), the title of an anthology of new poetry that emerged from the same urban environment as the beat groups, and was performed in some of the same venues they played in. Tenth in the

Penguin Modern Poets series, this volume became Britain's biggest selling contemporary poetry collection and, with its combination of wit, everyday subject matter – much of it drawn from Liverpool itself – as well as inventive and accessible play with language, introduced a young generation to the hitherto stuffy and intimidating world of poetry.[1] It is significant, then, that two art forms which helped define Liverpool culturally in this decade and brought national, indeed international, attention, were framed by its fast flowing river.

The Mersey, 4.8 km across at its widest point and with the second highest tidal range in Britain, is a formidable and unyielding presence. Its potential was first harnessed for hugely profitable mercantile ends at the start of the eighteenth century, when revolutionary dock engineering and architecture created the port infrastructure that would propel Liverpool to global significance through multiple maritime trade routes. Unsurprising then, that the Mersey literally flows through the culture that developed in tandem with the city's mercantile growth. For music writer, Paul Du Noyer, the city's pop musicians do just what the river does: 'they reflect the heavens while they churn the dirt below', a reference to the silt and sand kicked up by the river's fast current that renders it murky brown.[2] From The Beatles, through successful chart acts of the 1980s like Echo & The Bunnymen, to more recent groups such as The Coral, there is a strand of transcendent Liverpool music that reflects a duality, 'a contrast between the grit of its people, with their workaday concerns, and the romantic escapism inherent in their songs.'[3]

Merseyside-born writer Malcolm Lowry, author of the modernist classic *Under the Volcano* (1947), had a more ambivalent relationship to Liverpool, which he described as 'that terrible city whose main street is the ocean'.[4] He sailed from the Mersey in 1927, aged seventeen, as a deck hand on a tramp steamer bound for the Far East, a maiden adventure that produced his first novel, *Ultramarine* (1933), and the start of a writing career of largely unfin-

1 Adrian Henri, Roger McGough and Brian Patten, *The Mersey Sound* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).

2 Paul Du Noyer, 'The Heavens Above and the Dirt Below: Liverpool's Radical Music', in *Liverpool City of Radicals*, eds. John Belchem and Bryan Biggs (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 97.

3 Paul Du Noyer, 'The Heavens Above and the Dirt Below: Liverpool's Radical Music', 97.

4 Malcolm Lowry, 'The Forest Path to the Spring', in *Hear Us O Lord from Heaven Thy Dwelling Place & Lunar Caustic* (London: Picador, 1991), 226.

ished work that he called – in reference to an intended suite of novels – 'The Voyage that Never Ends'. The river as site of restless journeying – and the port as destination, place of refuge, and also point of departure – informs novels, poems, songs, films and other art created in response to maritime environments, and the Mersey and Liverpool are no exception.

Fig. 1: SS Pyrrhus leaving the River Mersey. Malcolm Lowry sailed on this boat in 1927

Apart from in *Ultramarine*, however, Merseyside is a central locus for Lowry, together with the port of Preston, further North up the Lancashire coast, in only one, uncompleted, novel, *In Ballast to the White Sea*, the only manuscript of which the writer, falsely, claimed had been destroyed in a fire, and which was only published, in a scholarly edition, nearly 60 years after his death.[5] Even though he never returned home, the river and seaport of his childhood inform Lowry's writing.[6] It is as if the coastline and topography of the Wirral, the peninsula that faces Liverpool across the Mersey where he grew up, clung to his consciousness, surfacing in poems, or remembered in forensically

5 Malcolm Lowry, *In Ballast to the White Sea: A Scholarly Edition* (Ottowa: University of Ottawa Press, 2014).

6 See Bryan Biggs and Helen Tookey, eds., *Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), particularly the editors' introduction and Colin Dilnot's chapter, 'Lowry's Wirral'.

described detail in a chapter of *Under the Volcano*. This book, set in Mexico yet mostly written in Canada, exemplifies Lowry's approach in writing 'about a particular place *from another place*'.[7]

For Lowry, Liverpool becomes a mythical site, one from which he was detached, yet onto which he superimposed memories that brought symbolic resonance. The writer grew up in the city's Wirral hinterland, in Caldy, a wealthy enclave surrounded by countryside, picturesquely overlooking the River Dee, with the mountains of North Wales beyond. Connected by rail and later road (through tunnels under the Mersey) to Liverpool, where his father worked as a cotton broker, the area nonetheless felt remote from Lowry's 'terrible city', and, in contrast to it, represented innocence, a childhood idyll. This topographical imagining is evident again in Lowry's long sojourn in Canada, living in a squatter's shack in the Edenic setting of Dollarton, on the Burrard Inlet outside Vancouver, a port city he loathed. Christened his *Eridanus*, after the river of Greek mythology and the heavenly constellation, Lowry's waterside paradise was in contrast to the 'sordid and sanctimonious city … (and gave) him everything he desired – independence, escape and isolation amid the healing balm afforded by love and nature.'[8] For Lowry, the hinterland was where he was happiest, a backwater that allowed a simpler existence and deeper relationship to the natural world. Arguably, the hinterland helps inform and shape his understanding of modernity: as a condition not solely enshrined in the experience of the modern industrial city. Expressed most clearly in his 'Paradiso' novella, *Forest Path to the Spring*, Lowry's embrace of nature as an alternative to urban alienation, harks back to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*,[9] and also anticipates American Beat writing, which found beauty in the great American hinterland as much as in the relentless rhythms of New York life.

7 Helen Tookey, 'Re-Placing Malcolm Lowry: From the Mersey to the world (and back again)', paper presented at University of Brighton Conference, Placemaking, 29 May 2015, and published in *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* Vol. 8 no. 2 & 3, 2015. Author's italics.

8 Gordon Bowker, *Pursued by Furies: A Life of Malcolm Lowry* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 300.

9 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, 1854.

City on the edge

The Mersey's Anglo-Saxon name translates as 'boundary river', separating the ancient kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria and, later, the neighbouring English counties of Lancashire and Cheshire. Despite once being 'gateway of Empire',[10] Liverpool is not a typically English city. Rather, it is on the 'Celtic fringe' of the UK, consolidated by the large influx of Irish who arrived in the port in the nineteenth century, as well as the city's proximity to Wales, and the presence of Scots too.[11] It is also on the edge of Europe. Until the late seventeenth century its horizons extended no further than Ireland, but through Britain's imperial quest and colonial consolidation in the following two centuries, Liverpool's maritime expansion connected it to other parts of the world, and, from the 1960s onwards, its global reach extended beyond trade in goods via its cultural and sporting reputation.

Yet post-war economic decline and decades of misfortune meant that Liverpool had become by the 1970s – notwithstanding the worldwide fame of its greatest cultural export, The Beatles – a symbol for all that was wrong in post-Empire, post-industrial Britain. Abandoned by central government and vilified by a media concentrated in London, it felt cut adrift, until European Union structural funding came to the rescue. Culture was a major beneficiary, and played a significant role driving regeneration, as abandoned dockside buildings were transformed into museums and galleries, notably Merseyside Maritime Museum and Tate Liverpool, which opened in the disused Albert Dock in 1980 and 1988 respectively. This process culminated in the city being awarded European Capital of Culture in 2008.

Liverpool shares its *difference* with other 'cities on the edge' like Naples, Marseilles and New Orleans, described as '"strangers" to their own nation states'[12] by Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey in their provocation, *Edgy Cities*, where they argue that 'in maritime culture (time is) always felt differently through the rhythms of the tides. Port cities had a *tide* sense, never a

10 See Tony Lane, *Liverpool Gateway of Empire* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1987); second revised edition, as *Liverpool City of the Sea* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997).

11 In 1886, the *Illustrated London News* described Liverpool as 'a wonder of the world…the New York of Europe, a world-city rather than merely British provincial', cited in John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool exceptionalism*, second edition (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006).

12 Steve Higginson and Tony Wailey, *Edgy Cities* (Liverpool: Northern Lights, 2006), 13.

time sense… '.[13] This is in contrast to neighbouring towns that also expanded rapidly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, driven by the industrial revolution, places like Liverpool's North West rival, Manchester, where the regulated time of factory work, the strict regime of clocking in and clocking out, created a very different culture, one closely observed by Friedrich Engels who lived there for 30 years. His report, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, which described the 'social misery' of such industrial towns, fed into the *Communist Manifesto* that he and Karl Marx wrote in 1848.[14]

In Manchester's cotton mills and factories employing masses of workers, labour could be more easily organised than it could in Liverpool, with its casualised workforce largely dependent on the docks. Manchester played a pivotal role in the founding of the British trade union movement, while Liverpool gained a reputation as the 'organiser's graveyard', despite occasional mass displays of working class solidarity, such as in the 1911 transport strike. A more fractured workforce, one divided along sectarian lines, Catholics against Protestants, continued to mark out Liverpool from more solidly Labour, Northern English industrial cities, and, post-war, it was the last of these large conurbations to elect a Socialist administration.

This differentiation of port cities from their hinterlands through their 'exceptionalism'[15] – their cosmopolitan populations, historic global connections, dissenting traditions, independent spirit, black economies, or the aforementioned political complexities – is evident in Liverpool's relationship to its immediate hinterland, and arguably farther inland to the wider North of England, to Lancashire and Yorkshire. Defined as 'lying inland from the coast' and 'remote from urban areas', *hinterland*, used in a literal sense, represents only a fraction of Liverpool's adjoining territory, the towns and villages 'out in the sticks', populated by 'woollybacks', a derogatory local slang expression dating back over a century for people from adjoining areas who travel to Liverpool for work or entertainment, and who lack Scouse credentials.[16]

13 Ibid.,17. Author's italics.

14 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, Penguin Books, 1848).

15 See John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool exceptionalism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

16 By the 1980s, Liverpool's Lancashire hinterland had become 'a rust-belt of vacant cotton mills, declining coal fields and stagnant canals'. Jonathan Brown, Matthew Cocks, Chris

Manchester, however, while technically the 'land behind' and located over 60km from the sea, can hardly be defined as part of Liverpool's hinterland: until 1982 it had its own port at Salford, connected to the Mersey by the Manchester Ship Canal – a feat of Victorian engineering that bypassed Liverpool and helped to undermine its monopoly on maritime trade in the region. And Manchester is also the regional capital, the 'Northern Powerhouse' whose higher concentration of commerce, media, transport infrastructure and population renders Liverpool its poor relation. Yet while Manchester can boast its International Festival, a high-profile reputation in the arts, and the international reach of both its footballing success and musical exports, Liverpool retains its global cultural brand, in no small part due to its position as a maritime city shaped by its historic interface, as a port, with the world.

While Higginson and Wailey conceptualise ports like Liverpool as 'irregular places', where regular time is suspended, in our homogenised present their idiosyncrasies and independence are in danger of disappearing, as local distinctiveness is increasingly bleached out by processes of globalisation, the economic effects of neoliberalism, and the march of gentrification. And with their traditional role as global interfaces becoming increasingly determined by the digital, there are new pressures for old port cities to compete in this rapidly changing environment.

Yet ports are also mythological places, *ports of dreams*, in relation to both destination – Liverpool held the hopes of the Irish fleeing famine and poverty – and departure – the persecuted, destitute and workless, many from Eastern Europe, who embarked from the port in their hundreds of thousands in the nineteenth century, seeking a better life across the Atlantic. Liverpool was a boomtown for merchants dreaming of making great fortunes overseas through colonial adventure, not least in the Transatlantic slave trade, which, together with the trade in commodities that it enabled – sugar, tobacco, cotton – brought great wealth, to such an extent that it has been claimed that every brick in the town was 'cemented with the blood of an African'.[17]

Couch, David Shaw and Olivier Sykes in 'A City Profile of Liverpool', *Cities*, online journal, 2013, 9. https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/docs/A%20city%20of%20Liverpool%20profile%20Cities.pdf.

17 The quote is attributed to actor George F. Cooke, who, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, appearing drunk on the Liverpool stage, retorted to the hisses of the audience, 'I have not come here to be insulted by a set of wretches, every brick of whose infernal town

Global trade and the expansion of Empire enabled global communities to take root in the port, as seamen from Africa, Arabia and China made their home in docklands, many marrying local, often Irish, women. Cultural exchange and hybridity is the nature of seaports: The Beatles, for instance, absorbed African American and country music and adopted the transatlantic swagger of the 'Cunard Yanks' – those Liverpool merchant seamen who manned the Cunard liners that went back and forth to New York after the Second World War, bringing exotic pop culture and tantalising glimpses of modernity to a city still shattered from wartime bombing and enduring economic privation.

A century before, in Herman Melville's *Redburn* (1849), the New York protagonist sea captain is given a map of Liverpool by his father, only to find on arrival that it is fifty years out of date and the street plan has altered dramatically. Like all port cities, Liverpool is dynamic, its fortunes shifting with the tides, and since Melville's account, the seaport has continued to evolve, physically and in the imagination: it has been variously misread, misrepresented and mythologised – unsurprisingly perhaps for a city whose symbol is a mythical creature, the Liver Bird.

The pool of life

Exploring mythological Liverpool, its 'unconscious textures and imaginary realms', there are some surprising revelations. The Swiss psychiatrist and founder of analytical psychology, Carl Gustav Jung, dreamt in 1927, of Liverpool as the *Pool of Life*. Unlike Lowry or Melville, he had never visited the city, however. It came to him in a dream:

> I found myself in a dirty, sooty city. It was night, and winter, and dark, and raining. I was in Liverpool. With a number of Swiss – say, half a dozen – I walked through the dark street. I had the feeling that there we were coming from the harbour, and that the real city was actually up above, on the cliffs. We climbed up there. It reminded me of Basel, where the market is

is cemented with an African's blood', noted in Ramsay Muir, *A History of Liverpool* (London, Williams & Norgate, 1907), 204.

> down below and then you go up through the Totengässchen (the 'Alley of the Dead') …[18]

He goes on to describe the scene: a square where the streets converge, in the middle of which is a pond and a small island containing a single magnolia tree blazing with light. His companions spoke of another Swiss who was living in Liverpool, and expressed surprise that he should have settled here. 'I was carried away by the beauty of the flowering tree and the sunlit island, and thought, "I know very well why he has settled here". Then I awoke'. Jung then interprets the dream: his 'vision of unearthly beauty' had enabled him to live: 'Liverpool was the "Pool of Life". The "liver" is … the seat of life – that which "makes to live".'[19]

Jung started working in Zürich in 1900, and 75 years later an imaginary connection was made between the Swiss city and Liverpool, where a poet, Peter O'Halligan, set out to realise Jung's dream of the Pool of Life in the same location, Mathew Street, where The Beatles had started their journey in a cellar club, The Cavern. In a former fruit warehouse, he established the Liverpool School of Language, Music, Dream and Pun, a free-form arts space where synchronicity and the unconscious were central, connecting memory with place and possibility. Mathew Street was becoming the epicentre of an emergent alternative culture in Liverpool, with, on the opposite side of the street from the Liverpool School, the music club Eric's, a subterranean hangout for the city's nascent punk scene, where groups like Big in Japan, Teardrop Explodes and Wah! Heat were formed, with independent record shop, Probe, just around the corner in Button Street.

It seemed as if Liverpool was about to explode, as it had in the early 1960s, with a new cultural vitality. Events at the Liverpool School included Ken Campbell's Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool, with *Illuminatus* – an anarchic performance adaptation of American writers Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's counter-cultural trilogy charting the 'ancient conflicts between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, the state and the individual, estab-

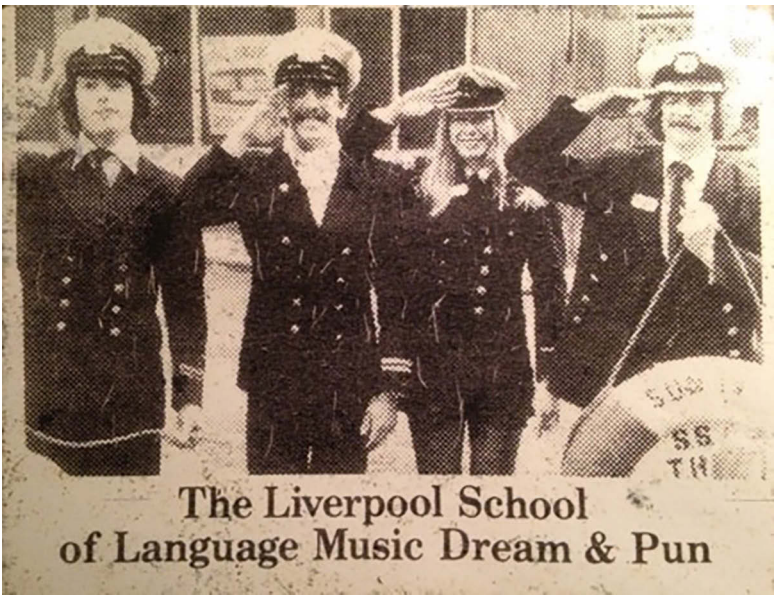
18 Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Collins Fountain Books, 1977 (1963)), 224.

19 Ibid., 224.

lishments and iconoclasts, us and them. Is the world really run by the Illuminati and are a confused bunch of dope freaks really our last chance?"[20]

The Liverpool School of Language, Music, Dream and Pun acknowledged the Jungian inspiration of its founding by organising three annual Jung festivals in Mathew Street between 1976 and 1978, inviting the Swiss Ambassador to the inaugural event.

Fig. 2: Liverpool School of Language, Music, Dream & Pun



The official duly obliged, arriving wearing his ceremonial regalia, apparently bemused by the absurdity of the occasion. O'Halligan's cousin, Sean Halligan, and his friend Donato Cinacolla III drove across Liverpool's European hinterland to Switzerland, to collect a piece of stone from a quarry near Bollingen where Jung had built his tower. From this stone a plaque was made, inscribed with the words 'Liverpool is the Pool of Life' and placed on the exte-

20 Review of *The Immortal Trilogy* in *Fortean Times*, issue 17 (August 1976), 26-27.

rior wall of the School. In addition, a bust of Jung was created to sit above it, being unveiled in June 1976 by Jung's grandson, Marc Baumann.[21]

The car journey inward to the heart of Europe, to a country bounded not by the sea but by mountains, reflects a different trade route for Liverpool. As gateway to a European hinterland, the port had occupied a strategic position on the continent's Western edge during the Second World War, both in terms of Transatlantic trade and as the Allies' lifeline – constantly at risk of attack from German submarines – to America. However, by the time the UK became a member of the European Union in 1973, Liverpool's already emasculated role as global port was about to diminish further, as trade shifted to Eastward destinations, to European markets. Merseyside found itself forgotten on the outer edge, not just of England, but of Europe too. In articulating a prophetic vision of a rejuvenated Liverpool gleaned from an obscure dream, the Liverpool School of Language, Music, Dream and Pun pointed the way for a different cultural outlook, one not dependent on a fading American dream, but one forged from a recognition and appropriation of earlier progressive thinking in Europe's heartland. The staff of the Liverpool School may have worn Swiss naval uniforms and been photographed in them posed around a lifebelt, while the building itself had ships' load line markings painted on its outside wall; yet their voyages were journeys, not of the oceans, but of the imagination.

Half a century earlier, in 1927, another cultural institution in the city centre, Bluecoat was formalised as the UK's first arts centre, and it too found inspiration in progressive ideas from Continental Europe's avant-garde artists, starting with two Post-Impressionist exhibitions the building hosted in 1911 and 1913, which included works by Picasso and Matisse. In the 1930s, diners in the building's restaurant, run by Liverpool bohemian arts group the Sandon Studios Society, included significant European arts figures such as Stravinsky, Bartok, and George Balanchine and other members of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Liverpool's strategic position as a European conduit to the Americas, as well as Imperial importer, arguably contributed to its openness to influences from outside the UK, looking both inward to Europe and across

21 The bust of Jung has been replaced by a less convincing sculpture, accompanied by a heritage plaque created by Larry Sidorczuk about the Liverpool School on the building, which is now an Irish themed pub, Flanagan's Apple, in a Mathew Street transformed into a Beatle tourist mecca and drinking destination.

the sea to America. And the city's arts infrastructure – including long-established venues like Bluecoat, short-lived ones like the Liverpool School, and more recent initiatives such as Liverpool Biennial – remained attuned to such international cultural currents long after the port's decline had set it.

New artistic migrations

Liverpool Biennial, the UK's first such festival of contemporary art, has, since its inception in 1999, brought artists to the city to engage with the poetics of a post-industrial maritime location, a 'shrinking city' depopulated through decades of decline.[22] The Biennial does not restrict itself to Europe's hinterland, casting its net far beyond Europe, outward to the rest of the world. Increasingly, issues around migration, homeland and borders, of free movement and citizenship, preoccupy the artists who travel to Liverpool to participate in the event, using a wide range of formal and found sites across the city.

For the 2008 Biennial, Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah created a pop up museum at Bluecoat entitled *After 12 Years*, part of his ongoing project, *The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind*. Ariana Park, which surrounds the United Nations office in Geneva, had become the repository of five olive trees that the artist had brought from his home, Ramallah, and replanted. The story of the trees, all but one of which have since disappeared, was told in the Bluecoat exhibition, drawing attention to the Museum's battle to get Swiss citizenship for the trees, having been resident in the country for 12 years. The accompanying brochure notes:

> The right of the return of a botanical object such as a tree is of concern to all those with an interest in the globalisation of capital markets and issues such as biodiversity and climate change. Due to social, political and geographical changes, the condition of the original location of many displaced biological

22 Liverpool's population has started to grow again. As a 'shrinking city', it is considered, within a wider discussion of the city's development, by Jonathan Brown, Matthew Cocks, Chris Couch, David Shaw and Olivier Sykes in 'A City Profile of Liverpool', *Cities*, online journal, 2013, accessed 1 June 2019, https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/mcs/lfs/docs/A%20city%20of%20Liverpool%20profile%20Cities.pdf.

specimens has changed, and it is a difficult task to return them to exactly their original location.

A Biennial partner, as a venue and sometimes curatorially, Bluecoat's own year-round arts programme has long worked with artists engaged with post-colonial realities, including those of the Middle East. In 2017, another Palestinian artist, Larissa Sansour, presented a film at Bluecoat, *In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* that adopted a science fiction trope to address the politics of archaeology, depicting a resistance group on the brink of apocalypse, a metaphor for the ongoing Palestinian struggle. Territory and the experience of migration and exile was also the subject of Lebanese artist Ayman Balbaaki's *Destination X* installation, shown in the gallery in 2010.

Fig. 3: Ayman Baalbaki, Destination X installation at Bluecoat in Arabicity exhibition, curated by Rose Issa, 2010 © Bluecoat, Liverpool

Working with a long-established Arab community in Liverpool that grew from the settlement of mainly Yemeni sailors, Bluecoat initiated the Liverpool Arab Arts Festival 20 years ago, and continues to participate in a programme that addresses the region's political tensions and worsening refugee crisis.

Liverpool is no longer the port of departure for the New World, nor a place for seafarers from all corners of the Empire to drop anchor. Neither is it a place for new arrivals, other than the large number of foreign students, particularly from China, studying at its universities. Yet the echoes of Liverpool's former maritime global pre-eminence – resonances of past migrations and settlement – provide a fertile backdrop against which contemporary artists addressing diasporas, postcolonial fault-lines, and the experience of exile, can present their work.

Cargo of questions

2017 saw the 300th anniversary of the Bluecoat building, an opportunity to explore its heritage: two centuries as a charity school for orphaned children, and from the early twentieth century a pioneering arts centre. The tercentenary year was an appropriate time to reflect on a history that began with the growth of modern Liverpool in the early eighteenth century through the port's expansion. Merchants involved in the trafficking of human cargo – the triangular trade from Liverpool to West Africa, and on to the Caribbean and America – also supported the school. This contradiction of barbarism (the enslavement of Africans) and philanthropy (helping poor children) was one of the themes of the year's final exhibition, *In the Peaceful Dome*, which brought the story up to date with the inclusion of several artists addressing legacies of slavery.

These resonances were further explored in a conference and participation weekend in partnership with Liverpool's International Slavery Museum, which included a powerful improvised music and movement performance, *Sweet Tooth*, by British artist Elaine Mitchener, interrogating her own Jamaican background and our troubled relationship to sugar.

Fig. 4: Elaine Mitchener, Sweet Tooth performance at Bluecoat, 2017, with (left) Jason Yarde and (right) Sylvia Hallett. Photo: Brian Roberts © Bluecoat, Liverpool

This Bluecoat commission was the latest in a long line of postcolonial enquiries to look at the trajectory of Liverpool's mercantile maritime history. The arts centre first engaged with this area of discourse in 1985 with *Black Skin/Bluecoat*,[23] an exhibition by four emerging Black British artists interrogating issues of race and identity. One of them, Keith Piper, subsequently worked with Bluecoat on a major exhibition project, *Trophies of Empire* that took Columbus' voyage to the New World, 500 years earlier, as a starting point from which to examine the imprint of colonialism on Liverpool and two other port cities, Atlantic-facing Bristol and Europe-facing Hull.

What all of the above programmes – involving performances, a conference, commissions, gallery exhibitions and site specific interventions – had in common was the artists' acknowledgement of history, framing globalisation not as a recent phenomenon accelerated by neoliberalism and the revolution in digital technology, but as an extrapolation from the beginnings of global trade and colonial and capitalist expansion, processes that Euro-

23 *Black Skin/Bluecoat*, Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool (1985), featuring Sonia Boyce, Eddie Chambers, Tom Joseph and Keith Piper.

pean ports like Liverpool were instrumental in driving and from which they derived great wealth.

The port city as global interface also provided the context for another artwork, *Re:LODE* by Philip Courtenay, in *In the Peaceful Dome*. The essential stuff of maritime trade – crated cargo – was the physical and metaphorical focus of this installation in the gallery that revisited Courtenay's work from 25 years before, titled *LODE*.

Fig. 5: Philip Courtenay, LODE performance with Yellow House, Bluecoat courtyard, 1992 © Bluecoat, Liverpool

This was a live art commission connecting Liverpool, on the West coast of England, and another port city, Hull, on the East. Instead of physically connecting the two ports by land across the North of England, Courtenay went the long way around, drawing a map on the circumference of the globe, crossing continents and oceans, from Hull to Liverpool, via Europe, Asia, Australia, South America and Ireland.

He journeyed along this 'lode line', creating simple compasses in each place he visited, to indicate its relative position to Liverpool and Hull, bringing these back home, and packing them into wooden crates. He then collaborated with Liverpool community group Yellow House, to transport the crates

in a performance from the docks by the Mersey, and unpack them at Bluecoat, where their content and origin were discussed. The young people participating related the cargo to their own experience, growing up in a port city that now offered little prospects for them to connect to a world that some of their fathers, or grandfathers, had experienced as dockers or sailors.

Courtenay used the exhibition to reflect again on globalisation, which had provided the work's original impulse, as well as digital communication, repositioning *LODE* in the current geopolitical situation, particularly the context of Brexit and contested borders, both ideological and actual. As an ongoing project, one idea the artist has for *LODE* is to transport the cargo from Liverpool, not however sailing from the Mersey and out across the ocean, but taking instead a slow route – a barge along the canal network across Northern England – engaging people he encounters on the way in conversation about Britain, Europe and national identity. Arriving in the seaport of Hull, which faces mainland Europe across the North Sea, the work would resonate with Britain's angst over Brexit as it contemplates an uncertain future. Courtenay's crates however, laden with the potential for imaginary realms and the dissolution of borders, constitute a 'cargo of questions', opening up possibilities beyond the horizon.