

Collaborate project proposals

Liverpool Biennial <https://www.biennial.com/>

What do you want to explore and why?

Liverpool Biennial would like to examine the reciprocal benefits of connecting locally-based, working-class communities with contemporary visual art practice. This research is initiated by a re-assessment of the changed needs of Liverpool's working-class communities, exacerbated by the pandemic, and the changed needs of an international biennial visual arts organisation which must respond to issues of economic and environmental sustainability.

The Biennial is a worldwide framework in which contemporary visual art is created, co-commissioned and shared. Prior to the pandemic biennials were characterised by globalisation, transnational mobility and the international visitor. However, discourse and values are shifting. The imposed restrictions of Covid-19 are refocusing biennial practices to examine how, and if, they can better engage with the local. This valorisation of 'the local' is articulated against the negative referencing of 'the provincial' in international biennial discourse, complicated further by national concepts of 'levelling-up' and 'the Northern Powerhouse'.

Liverpool is England's fourth most deprived local authority and economic, health and social inequalities are increasing in the wake of the pandemic. This research project proposes an assessment of how international festivals can foster connections with local working-class communities. Are there opportunities for international art practice in Liverpool to connect with the local and explore issues of social deprivation that exceed national politics and alternatively propose frameworks of international solidarity?

For the purposes of this application 'working class' is defined in relation to the seven domains of deprivation, which are: income, employment, skills and training, health and disability, crime, barriers to housing services, and living environment. Liverpool is disproportionately represented in the lower quintiles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation therefore the working-class identity, as defined in this application, makes up a significant proportion of the local population of select wards.

Liverpool is an exceptional context for a Biennial. The city remains staunchly committed to left-wing politics and fiercely aware of its working-class history. Over the past 25 years the Biennial has physically interacted with the residue of this in the presentation of exhibitions in former industrial locations. We strongly believe that only through connecting with our locality can we present internationally relevant visual art that can engage with the global issues of cultural value: who creates this value? Who are the gatekeepers? How can lived experience intersect with theoretical proposals for a different engagement with our environment, support equity, and validate different forms of knowledge?

Since Liverpool Biennial was founded in 1998, the city's landscape has significantly changed, and our approach and programme must too. This research will provide invaluable insight into understanding the needs of local working-class populations and will also contribute to

contemporary global biennial discourse on the role, influence, and intersections that local settings can have on biennial programmes. Our festival model, public art strategy, and previous community legacy projects in Granby, Everton and Anfield, which are all areas of high deprivation, demonstrate our experience and relevance.

Liverpool Biennial delivered the 11th edition in 2021 after a year's postponement. Travel restrictions resulted in our highest percentage of audiences from Liverpool (37%). The Index of Multiple Deprivation was collected based on postcode, revealing that one third (32%) came from the poorest 20% of English neighbourhoods. While our international status and draw have allowed the organisation to grow significantly in acclaim and reach over the last 20 years, this research project proposes a reorientation of our mission which will elevate and reprioritise work with local communities. This reorientation will ensure we remain committed to broadening and deepening engagement with contemporary visual art.

What are you looking for in an academic research partner?

We would like to collaborate with an academic researcher who is experienced with field work and undertaking a conversational approach. We will need to gain the trust and support of working-class communities in Liverpool and would seek someone experienced in co-production methodologies. We would like to understand better and develop different methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) from different disciplinary backgrounds, to help us understand the value and impact of our cultural activities locally.

We would further be interested in working with a research partner with experience of evaluating cultural activity in different international settings, and with particular experience of exploring issues of class experience in relation to establishing indices of cultural value.

Other areas of interest include experience of constructing and reviewing ethical frameworks for such activity. How does the turn towards socially engaged art practice in local arenas intersect with the practice of artists and culture professionals? Previous Liverpool biennial projects have encompassed local regeneration, recovery programmes and supporting family carers for children who are not living with their parents and who have limited eligibility for social services support. How do we draw in academic expertise around an ethics of such practice?

We are also interested in how we use the research and data for sustaining relationships within communities, and communicating internationally and advocating for a shift in biennial practice.