

Stepping down from the pedestal and up to an oil drum – Updated with video!

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Liverpool Biennial 2010 public realm curator **Lorenzo Fusi** discusses unexpected art happenings you may come across on your visit to this year's festival...



Ready?

“Amongst the several exciting artworks on show at this year’s Biennial, there is a series of actions that will occur unexpectedly throughout the entire exhibition period and happen in the most unexpected areas of the city without prior warning.

These happenings are organized and coordinated by the former students of the **Catedra Arte de Conducta**, an anarchic Fine Arts school initiated by **Tania Bruguera** in her hometown of Havana (Cuba), devoted to performance-based art practices engaging the city by using its component and vital elements as a raw material.

Several of these students (now artists on their own right) will animate the Biennial by presenting both new and original works and re-inventing seminal pieces by **Allan Kaprow**.

The first of these re-inventions happened during the opening week of the **Liverpool Biennial 2010** and by means of this blog we would like to document their diverse epiphanies. This will be the only realm where these ephemeral actions do exist, after having happened... unless you have personally taken part to them in which case they will stay in your muscles, hands, heart, soul and memory.

Transfer is a work created by **Allan Kaprow** in 1968: the score for this piece is quite simple... we might define it as a piece of street theatre or an environmental performance.

A group of people meets in order to physically “transfer” oil or chemical disposal drums from one area to another of the city or its surroundings. The modality in which the movement of these items happens is not rigidly dictated. In fact, I would argue that the real creative act stands precisely in devising the way each group transfer the barrels, selecting the destination and composing the drums upon arrival in order to create a setting for the group to take a victorious collective photographic portrait. The only other prescriptive element is for the group to paint the drums with a different colour at each time, so to signal the passage of time and layering of experiences. Basically, after each transfer the drums look different and yet the same. They simply acquire a different patina and they are enriched by the experiences of those who have moved them around.

The process is in theory endless. Each scenario and reinvention adds a new stratum: contributes with a different chapter to the narrative, that is to say, the history of the piece.

Tania Bruguera and **Bram Kaprow** were the first artists to reinvent **Transfer** in Liverpool. I was amongst their collaborators...

On Friday 17 September the opening event quickly reaches its climax: professionals, artists, journalists and art lovers from the world round are waiting for the official speeches to be delivered at St George's Hall to then freely enjoy the private view.

A certain tension is palpable amidst the mix of boredom and excitement that anticipates any official ceremony.

Furtively, a small gathering of collaborators and volunteers materialize in one of the exhibition venues where the oil drums are exhibited in their inertia as if they were an untouchable piece of art that had eventually found its final collocation. Misleadingly a label indicates: **Transfer** by **Allan Kaprow**, as to say: this is all there is to know...

Coordinated by Tania and Bram (in a purely guerilla style) the group starts loading the drums in a lorry. The excitement is so contagious that even the guards (those who were meant to protect the artworks) collaborate in the action. Silently the “sculpture” vanishes to enter into the world. In fact, the very world the drums supposedly belong to.



Loading into van at Biennial HQ on Renshaw Street

The van is too small to contain all the drums at once so two trips are necessary. The group splits. Some follow the first truckload, whilst the others wait for the lorry to come back. All but two barrels are transported with the second shipment. It seems pointless to have the van come back again to collect only two drums. Bram decides to simply roll them downhill. The final destination is **St George's Hall**: the magnificent location built on the wilting branches of empire where the official opening ceremony is taking place.

Tania had asked **Lewis Biggs**, the artistic Director of the Biennial, to carry on with his speech no matter what. She does not share many details: all she wants is for Lewis to be quintessentially British and not to acknowledge what happens around him.

Meanwhile, Bram and I are pushing the drums to their final destination. We are very casual during the journey. Stopping at the traffic lights, greeting the passersby and engaging in spontaneous conversations, we finally reach the main station.

Artists and friends, completely unaware of our whereabouts and intentions, see us and help. Not a single word is shared, not a sign. This speechless communication and fraternal support is so moving that I want to cry. This moment of mutual and reciprocal understanding transpires so vividly that the smiles and support of the occasional witness becomes even more tangible. A bond is created. We are funny creatures, silly perhaps, but not bad ones.



Touched 2010 artist Daniel Bozhov lends a hand...

Surprisingly it is the art world to give us attitude if anyone. Some fashionistas and “you don’t know who I am”s instead of helping give us a glance full of pity, look at us behind their shades and walk away. I have seen all this before, their body language maintains. But, really, what is it exactly that you have seen?!

I am so relieved not to have to act their part. I am so pleased not to be cool, in fact not to be “cold”. The wind cuts the skin: I am tired.

Everybody is inside: sentences flow endlessly. Our oil drums sit beautifully by the Greek colonnade and wait to be lifted up the stairs. We look at each other in anguish: another effort is needed so up we go.

A BBC journalist instead of recording what it is happening, takes his jacket off and starts moving barrels. We are covered in sweat. We smile. There is something prodigious, an aura that keeps us moving. We are unstoppable. The staff at St George’s are friendly, they knew we were coming, but they cannot help themselves: they are concerned and worried. This is a listed building, they keep saying.



Artists and journalist celebrate making it to the St George's Hall steps

We are focused but very serene. We appear to be harmless but we are entering the site with over 60 large oil drums. It is a surreal situation: we look like an old lady carrying a walking stick in one hand and a pistol in the other. We are indeed vulnerable and strong.

Lewis is speaking as we break through. One by one all the drums congregate in front of the stage. We pile them. The speaker gradually disappears, only his voice being audible. Large sheets of plastic have been laid onto the floor... we try to be as meticulous as possible. A proper crime scene is recreated.

I see no one, listen to no one. They are not there. Manoeuvring large oil drums when you have to go through a large and dense audience isn't as simple as it seems.

I accidentally hit someone: sorry! I say.

They are all there (the barrels, I mean): it is time to leave our mark on their surface. Spray paint cans materialize. The St George's Hall staff are paralyzed. They somehow trust us, but we do not look so innocent anymore.



Transfer is completed inside St George's Hall

White crosses are depicted on the drums' armored shells. It is a simple gesture. Those barrels ultimately show themselves for what they truly are and stand for: they symbolize a heavily polluted society. Nothing else needs being added: click. A photo is taken. We are off. And so are the oil drums...

I have not slept all night, thinking about this happening. Probably it has touched nobody other than us. But I felt so energized by it that I only wish the same might occur, eventually, in other people's lives."

Lorenzo Fusi