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Bluecoat Tercentenary Celebrated With 106 Previously Exhibited Artists On Public View

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2017 marks Bluecoat's tercentenary, making it the oldest building in Liverpool city centre and the UK's first arts centre: quite an achievement. At the vanguard of 300 days of celebrations is Public View, an exhibition bringing together works by a whopping 106 artists who have previously exhibited at Bluecoat. Curated by Artistic Director Bryan Biggs, it aims to provide a flavor of Bluecoat's curatorial interests, cultivated over 1,000 public exhibitions.

The genesis of Public View can be traced to the concurrent heritage display Art at the Heart of Bluecoat. Featuring a wealth of archival material over a 100 year period – from well-thumbed exhibition brochures to photos of Sun Ra's shimmering 1990 performance – it engagingly charts how artist-led activity has defined Bluecoat and forged a close relationship with the city. The highlight is a visually arresting bank of exhibition posters running up the monumental Vide wall; despite its scale, this display represents only a microcosm of its exhibition history.

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With that in mind, we are chronologically eased into Public View through artists who exhibited or performed around the gallery's formal establishment in 1968. Documentary images of Mark Boyle's first public performance of *Son et Lumiere* for Earth, Air, Fire, and Water (1966) stand out: gorgeous snapshots of a cacophony of sound, light and kaleidoscopic visuals.

The prominence of experimental performance and music in Bluecoat's history is highlighted with several works intertwined with North West musical heritage. The complexity of these links, fuelled by Biggs' own specialist music knowledge, echoes in Jeremy Deller's *History of the World* (1998), a textual visualisation underpinning Bluecoat commissioned performance *Acid Brass* (1997), in which acid house music collided with a live brass band.

While the exhibition is remarkably well paced, the sheer amount of work inevitably has ramifications. Many works have previously been exhibited at Bluecoat, with others especially remade or completely new. This assortment leads to several works feeling dated or occasionally comprised in terms of size and quality; it's a shame to see Tony Oursler lost on the stairwell with a flat preparatory drawing. However, this could arguably be attributed to many artists having donated work to Bluecoat for a fundraising auction later in the year.

The numerous gems nestled within the show outweigh these minor foibles. Nina Edge's transparent window vinyls of tinned up houses, taken from her 2016 Contravision project, brings the Welsh Streets to Bluecoat; directly referencing the numerous threats to Bluecoat throughout its long history as well as its wider support of artist-led activism. Merseyside-born Mark Leckey's brief video proposal for his Haywood Touring Exhibition The Universality Addressability of Dumb Things, Prp4aShw (2010-13), captures the verve and conceptual promise that the show delivered.

The third gallery space powerfully highlights Bluecoat's adventurous curatorial programming in the 1980s. Work by several artists associated with The Blk Art Group, including Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper and the recently re-evaluated Lubaina Himid, demonstrates Bluecoat's long-term support of British-based black and Asian artists. Referencing key Bluecoat exhibitions such as The Trophies of Empire (1985), issues of colonial legacies (including Bluecoat's own historical slave-trade associations), black identity and gender are reconvened. Despite being printed on an obsolete dot-art printer, Ann Whitehurst's stinging critique of Bluecoat's disabled access Staying on the Map (1994) still packs a hefty punch. Whitehurst's institutional critique played a crucial role in pushing through the eventual capital redevelopment of the gallery.

Public View is undoubtedly Biggs' singular vision. It demands your time. It is very much his exhibition and a reflection of his curatorial achievements, and that of his many colleagues over the years, in establishing Bluecoat as a respected outpost of contemporary art. As artist Emily Speed noted in her opening night speech, Bluecoat has crucially provided countless artists the space and time to grow. While nostalgia lingers heavy in the gallery air, the choice of expansive and clear labelling opens the exhibition up to multiple readings, connections, and parallel histories; think Deller's mind map.

Ultimately, I return to Alan Dunn's scrolling text work Recordings from a Dark City (2017-1994), commissioned by Bluecoat in 2008 and updated for the exhibition. As a sonic inventory of conversations Dunn overheard in Liverpool over the years, from politics to football banter, it presents an alternative reading of the city over time. Public View reads similarly; a collection of fleeting artistic moments that, taken together, define the Bluecoat's temperament over half a century.

Words: Jack Welsh

Image: Jeremy Deller History of the World 1998 (c) The artist, courtesy Paul Stolper Gallery.

Public View, Bluecoat Until Sun 23 Apr 2017