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Towards the Festival Format

CO-PROGRAMMED BY Hull Time Based Arts and the Ferens Art Gallery, the forth annual *Root* (Running Out of Time) Festival—*Skint*—took place in Hull between October the 5th and 20th, 1996, and was reviewed by David Briars in Live Art magazine's December issue. In his review of *Skint*, Briars opens by stating that "Hull's European dimension is actual, not virtual..." This statement would appear to infer that Hull has a particular relationship to the notion of boundaries, which would initially appear to be appropriate owing to the fact that historically the city's economic base was established on its ports as sites of import and export.

Briars then continues to state that: "One wonders why festivals such as this have a theme at all, as so few of the invited artists applied themselves assiduously to the festival theme, if at all." He then further criticises artists and co-programmers for having omitted to address one particular issue. Last year the boundaries of the district councils in Yorkshire, Humberside and Lincolnshire were restructured and Hull City Council introduced entrance charges to their municipal museums and galleries for non-residents. The Ferens Art Gallery which was a co-programmer and commissioner of works for *Skint*, was one of the venues affected and was also where I was hosted as live artist in residence throughout the festival. In his review Briars appears to be unable to accept the diversity of the ways in which the festival format establishes a pleonastic framework within which contexts themselves become shifting boundaries of purposeful investigation.

The necessity of how artists establish criteria by which to address contexts, as opposed to becoming obligated by them via the commodification of their sensibilities and individual identities, is a question the invited festival artist must recognise. *Root* has established a commissioning policy which, whilst supporting the development of new work, also clearly invites artists to examine their commodification by the organisations who commission them. In order to deal with the potential obligations and restrictions which commissions outline, it is a necessity for the festival commissioned artist to then address the relationship between their own product and those of the other artists. In addressing these issues the artist may then recognise that their work is situated in an extremely discursive programming format.

Briars' review and its criticism of the artists for not addressing one particular issue within a context would appear ripe, for such assiduousness also posits serious questions in relation to how the function of festivals are critically assessed and represented. One of a series of issues, which must be addressed when examining any cross-media festival, is their ability to engage with specific contextual issues whilst simultaneously ensuring that they successfully employ modes of agency which will protect the ensuing discourse from becoming limited by obligation to the most moderate elements of such structures.

Briars intones that the festival format should be employed in a prepossessed relationship with the umbrella title within which the inherent issues are

explored, in this case identified by the programmers as poverty, wealth and power. His belief that the artists chose not to allow the festival theme to control their practices to the point where their individual products may be recognised as significantly appropriate, offers the opportunity to reconsider the role of the festival format and their relationships to artists. Festival environments frequently offer contextual frameworks for artists but also position major questions in relation to how the artist will then deal with the inherent issues.

In establishing a schema within which to site discursive debates the co-programmers—particularly with a festival which searches to examine issues such as those in *Skint*—are also inviting artists to become responsible for establishing a series of criteria by which to assess their involvement and representation. These assessments demand that the artist examine their own commodification within that environment. However, in the recognition that the involvement in a festival is largely not an opportunity to showcase work and ego or to develop careerist tactics, but to enter into a framed discourse, the artist may rather discover that they are forced to address a wider series of contextual issues.

In clearly demonstrating his vision of the festival format as being generic ("festivals such as this"), and in his choice to ignore many other works which were site or context specific—as opposed to the single omission he identifies—Briars offers a piece of writing which clearly represents the crisis in the ways in which festivals are critically represented. In his reductivist selection of individual works he establishes the means by which he is able to examine the works stripped of the contextual discourse which the festival provided. This results in a selective commodification which the very format of the festival seeks to refute.

This means of selective representation provides the critic with a way in which to reject the significance of the festival format, and to further provide themselves with a means by which to ignore any responsibility to discover relevant forms of criticism. Ultimately the festival critic must become responsible for discovering a form of criticism which can actively parallel the means by which festivals establish internal discourse.

Festivals use a whole series of means by which to create overload: intense programming in a short period of time, clashing time schedules in the presentation of work, representations of diversities of practices and art forms and sites for exhibiting. The supposed function of this overload is to escape the reductivist tactics by which commodification of the inherent debates can take place.

Should festivals, whose aims and functions are to actively create complex sites for the development of critical debates (by structures awash with internalised confusion, contradictions and comparisons resulting in open questioning of how discourse is constructed) continue to be critically represented by value structures which appear to be dependant on the commodification of individual elements, then the potential for major misrecognition of their intrinsic value may be allowed to continue.