

Ingrid Haug Erstad & Abi Mitchell in conversation



Figure 1. Recenter, 2021, Joey Yu.

Ingrid Haug Erstad, Director, Bergen Assembly

Abi Mitchell, Assistant Curator, Liverpool Biennial

As part of a European collaborations project in which Bergen Assembly and Liverpool Biennial participated in December 2020, Ingrid Haug Erstad and Abi Mitchell were set up on a collegial blind date of sorts to discuss planning a festival during a pandemic.

Mitchell is Assistant Curator for Liverpool Biennial, a festival that was scheduled to open at two different times in 2020 and finally took place from March 2021 under strict distancing measures. She started working on the Biennial in March 2020, but was only able to work in the office with her colleagues for two days; the next ten months were spent working from home. Haug Erstad is Director of Bergen Assembly – a triennial in Bergen, Norway, which is planning its 2022 edition.

IHE: Maybe we could start by talking about audiences. You were explaining last time we spoke how your thinking on this has shifted. Usually, it seems obvious that what we should do is to try to get as many people as possible to come to our events, but now that doesn't feel like the responsible thing to do.

AM: That's exactly what we're thinking. And there have been so many things to think about, with postponing and then trying to reschedule. With a Biennial, like you say, you usually try to encourage as many visitors as possible, but we think it's irresponsible to encourage visits. Also, at this moment we're completely unsure what opening will actually look like. We've been talking about refocusing and looking to bring audiences in during the closing weeks instead of the opening weeks – centring around a celebration at the end rather than at the beginning. But again, we don't know if that can happen either. Like you say, it's usually a case of how many people can we get, how many different events can we host etc? And now we're

really looking at the balance between a safe, socially distanced number of people and the question of whether, if we can only safely have six people in the audience, we should be looking at an alternative format for that event.

IHE: It feels like some sort of new language has developed out of the pandemic: 'refocusing', 'recentering', 'rethinking'.

AM: Yes, definitely. An example of this is that early on, the festival was going to have three highlight weekends, which would have been key moments to bring in audiences, and they would have had different focuses. But with the shortened time and all the COVID restrictions, this went out of the window. There was a process of revising, then realignment and refocusing for the public programme as a whole within the new restrictions.

IHE: I'm not having to respond quickly all the time in the same way as I did before, so I'm looking from afar at other biennials and cultural institutions managing programmes over the last year. And that's one of the things that I've tried to think about in our institution: how counting audience numbers and visits is useful and fine, and is such an important way of communicating to politicians what we're doing, but it can become too important. I'm thinking about finding different languages to explain what we're doing and also to talk about the quality or depth or type of interaction people have. I think our strengths shouldn't necessarily be measured only in the number of people we can reach, but also in the type of meetings they have. So I'm wondering if this could be a chance for biennials to be allowed to focus on smaller groups. Sometimes you feel that you're not really making choices in that way – you're kind of reacting instead of acting.

AM: Yes, that's true. We definitely felt we were reacting rather than acting, and when all these different influencing and changing factors are coming at you, it just becomes a confusing mess! Then what you need to do is step back and think logically, and act on it, rather than just constantly struggling with all these different things that mean that the event you're trying to put on has morphed into something very different.

January might be another period of revision. We've got ideas for all these really exciting events, but how can we plan them until we know what the restrictions will be? How to put them together in a way that's not just reactive to COVID?

IHE: I'm also interested in whether our funders and the public will go along with the fact that culture is important even if you can't reach 40,000 people in your opening weekend. And that you can be ambitious even if you're not reaching so many people.

AM: I think we also need to accept that ourselves. I joined the festival late, but the wider team had already been planning the festival for nearly two years. They had in their minds this picture of what it was going to be, like the previous biennials, reaching so many people, having so many events, having a big opening party etc. So if it doesn't happen like that, then it's disappointing. I think what we need to do is admit to ourselves that it's not just happening to us, but to everyone, in different ways. If we can still present something and it's the best thing that we can present within the current times, within the current guidelines, then we should be thankful that we have produced it. So, yes, I think a bit of self-reflection is key, and telling ourselves as a team: 'It's OK. We know there'll be fewer people than usual, but that's the way it is.'

IHE: Yes. You have to sort of refocus away from this opening moment. We have to remember that with Bergen Assembly, the opening weekend is very important for the professionals, for the participants, for an international audience of visiting art professionals, but for the local audience, the opening weekend isn't necessarily the most important. It's a moment when we get some attention, and we reach a larger audience. The local audience know that it's open, but they're not the ones who are rushing there for the press conference and for the parties. The situation is forcing us to focus on the everyday life of the biennial rather than the beginning. I think we've all experienced that week after the opening weekend, when your

whole team is a bit dead and you're not able to keep going. So maybe it's also healthy to spread out that focus, as you say.

AM: Obviously many organisations are doing a lot of digital work at the moment and will probably have to continue to do so through next year. What we see there is a positive change, meaning that we have more time and resources to put towards making the final outcome as accessible as possible to local, national and international audiences. We'd be doing a lot of these things anyway, but this has really brought home a focus on widening that out. If people can't visit easily, how can we improve on that, whether it's in person or through a wider digital offer? We have to offer digital for everyone, but can we also do this in more targeted ways to make sure that the offer is as wide as possible? So that's been quite positive: it's given us the opportunity to think around that a lot more. Normally, you'd just be making sure that your standard stuff is in place. This time, we've been able to broaden that out quite a bit, which is one good thing that's come out of this period.

IHE: Are you thinking about different ways of distributing materials?

AM: Yes, definitely. A lot of museums have removed print materials from their spaces because they were acting as a touch point, with people repeatedly touching the same places. So things like hand-outs and leaflets, guides and maps have been removed. So then we were thinking about how we can still have people access that material, because they'll still need the information, but how do we disseminate it? And some of it will be really simple. We'll make sure that the PDF or the downloadable version works. And then we've been talking about how we can integrate into the city and into the venues more, so it's much easier to follow signage to find the venue. This will be much more important if you don't have as many printed maps. And we're looking at doing these really nice digital walk-throughs. I'm not entirely sure how they work, but it's quite a nice idea that you can still journey through an exhibition rather than just seeing a slideshow of images. Again, some of these are things that other places are already doing, but normally they'd have been at the bottom of our list.

IHE: The Gothenburg International Biennial print quite a nice newspaper, and I think they disseminate it through a local newspaper. That's something that we've thought about before too, because then you reach people directly and it's not a touch point. But it's probably quite expensive.

AM: Yes, we're looking at doing something with the Liverpool Echo, which is the local newspaper. I think that's a really nice way of connecting with your local community. My parents, for example, always buy their local paper, so if a festival appeared in the Yorkshire Post, they'd see it. But if it's a map in a gallery, then they probably wouldn't ever see it. And it's again, a way of engaging with the audiences that might have been on your list before, but that you haven't had time to do. It's much more important now, which is great.

IHE: Yes, you're right. That's really interesting to hear. And also, the digital exhibition tour. Are there are any particular examples you thought were really good?

AM: FACT in Liverpool have done a really great one, and The Tetley in Leeds comes to mind too. They've received really good feedback and the take-up has been quite a lot higher than they anticipated, with that a lot more people using it as a resource than they imagined.

IHE: I've heard similar things from the Berlin Biennial about their guided digital tours. I actually haven't seen it, but I think it's guided tours with the curators. They've also said that the interest has been a lot bigger than they thought it would be. And that a lot of companies that used to come on study trips have asked, could we have a digital tour? So that would be a combination of a meeting with a curator and looking at the digital content, which sounds quite nice. I think we should both be checking out what they did.

And I also really liked this exhibition that Anselm Franke curated many years ago called Animism. They've made a digital version of it on *efflux*. It's a combination of audio readings, clips of video works, images of archives and stills, and a text. You can read it and listen at the same time and kind of go through

the exhibition. And I thought that was really nice. But I've heard from someone else that they felt it was like one of these CD-ROM games, very old, like a really old school type of game. It's a combination of an audio book and a book, and I was quite intrigued by that. I like the audio part of it, so you kind of hear someone narrating what you're looking at.

Although I feel like a lot of us keep saying, 'Oh, I don't want any more digital content; I'm so tired of online conferences', there are still lots of instances where I get inspired and I feel like people are using different media in new ways. So it's also important to think about that. It's also important that people keep working. It's a way to keep having exchanges with people.

AM: It seems that people's feelings go up and down, that it's a real ebb and flow. At the beginning it was new and it was like, 'Oh, I can go to all these events.' And then you say, 'I'm fed up just looking at my screen', but then you come back again and you're like, 'Well, I can still go to this webinar that's taking place in America, which I would never have been able to go to before.' But if we just stopped making the work, then what would we do?

IHE: You're right. We still need to have exchanges and input and learn new things. It's impossible to just sit down and wait for this to pass.

AM: Exactly. We were having a bit of a rough time before Christmas, because we still didn't really know if we could set the opening date. But like I said earlier on, even if we don't know if we can open in March, we can't just stop. That's completely out of the question. So you still have to push forward and hope that you'll be open at some point. You need to accept that it's going to be like this for a while.

IHE: Maybe we could talk about this timeline question, and the idea of furlough, because I've been thinking about this quite a lot for my organisation. I realised that there are so many things that I haven't thought about, like types of insurances you can have for your staff members, or, for example, if someone gets sick, how long they're paid the full wage. We have good systems in Norway, but there's still so much potential for us as an organisation to really plan for this, and that should be part of the way we think. With a biennial, we have to carefully calculate every penny and every bit of energy we spend. There's an expectation to have this big momentum. So now I think that it's kind of irresponsible to plan in that way, but I also don't know how I'm going to communicate that or how I'm going to strategise together with our curators, who, of course are ambitious on behalf of their project or on behalf of the artists. Are you also thinking about this kind of energy?

AM: We're definitely thinking about it. When I started in my post in March, it was just before the lockdown. So at that point, we were still planning on opening in July of this year [2020] and having the normal run time. That would have been in four months' time, so everyone was in production mode and gearing up for the installation. And then, obviously, everything changed really, really quickly. It was a sudden stop, so it was quite hard to process on a personal level. And then there was a long pause over the summer when – I wouldn't say the pandemic was at its worst because it's obviously still very bad now – but over that period I was very much focused on the news and lockdown. So obviously we weren't producing during that time. It was impossible. It was a kind of in-between time where we were still having to plan, but also not able to plan, which was very strange. And then it suddenly all picked up again in September as everyone realised that to install in March, we'd have to ship in January, which meant we'd need to be finished in December, before Christmas. So then we were like, 'Oh no, we've got three months to pull it back together again!' So you've got like this up and down the mountain, which is really unusual for the festival, where usually you kind of ramp up and then you have a quiet period and then you pick up again for closing the install and evaluation. So it's really been pulled apart and put back together over this extended period. The circumstances are quite tricky – managing your relationships, your production schedules and your budget. And it all gets quite messy. And then on a personal level, all the staff are kind of up and down and stressed.

IHE: Yes. You're denied that great feeling at the opening when you feel you've accomplished

something, you've finished something, and you walk around and you can say, 'Really great job', and you can be pleased and relieved and celebrate and be happy.

AM: You're really looking forward to that moment. So if that moment is, taken away, it's quite hard to process the next step.

IHE: I know, it's really difficult. And some people who've worked on the event never even get to be part of finishing it, which is really frustrating. In my career before, I combined working on curatorial projects and working in cooking, and I always said that I really appreciated having a side gig where the timelines are shorter and you get this more immediate pay-off. Every day in the kitchen you have that moment, with every service, where you've accomplished something. And especially catering bigger events, where you're maybe doing an event a week, you have this rhythm sort of condensed into a week where you meet the other people you're working with. You look at the produce, you make a decision and you cook it. People eat and they're happy. And then you have a beer, right? But in the arts it's so much more stretched out. And sometimes you just have to celebrate the smaller moments: OK, we've handed everything in, we've set our schedule and our programme.

AM: That's a great suggestion. If you celebrate the small wins in the lead-up you're not putting as much pressure on yourself. And then you have those moments of positivity rather than just the continual stress and pressure.

IHE: I haven't thought about it until now, but this is something that's definitely interesting to reflect on.

AM: It's such a great suggestion, and it's often the simplest things that get overlooked but have the greatest impact. You're then punctuating that timeline with these moments where you can reflect and be positive. Because really at the end of the day, it's all the small things that make up that one big thing. So we should celebrate these smaller achievements.

IHE: I also think that we're quite good at being critical of what we're doing in our organisations and sometimes I really want to ask people to just give positive feedback, because we're so good at bashing ourselves for not doing this or that. And that's where the audience comes in. Then we can be proud of what the artist did or the curator did. I think it's actually quite important that we sometimes say 'Look at what we've done' and exchange the positive responses.

AM: These are great suggestions. I'm going to feed these back to my team.

IHE: That's nice. I'm so happy to talk to you. I feel like I'm learning a lot from hearing about your processes.

AM: I was just thinking the same thing!

Ingrid Haug Erstad and Abi Mitchell

Ingrid Haug Erstad is director of Bergen Assembly, a triennial for contemporary art that takes place in the city of Bergen. Haug Erstad has a background as curator of Bergen Kunsthall's projects space, Landmark, and later moved on to work as a freelance curator, initiating Multiplex, a curatorial platform devoted to artist's films and moving image in Berlin, and collaborating and assisting projects such as Time/bank (New York and Moscow) by E-flux and Agency of Unrealised Projects at DAAD galerie (Berlin).

Abi Mitchell is a freelance cultural producer, writer, editor and programmer working across contemporary art and music. Previously working at Liverpool Biennial, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and Yorkshire Sculpture International, her work focuses largely on cultural festivals and their public outreach. Driven by a desire to make contemporary art and music more accessible Mitchell has worked in public programming and education for over seven years. Outside of institutions she co-directs SPUR, a not-for-profit arts commissioning organisation based in the north of England that sporadically collaborates with artists and other small-scale organisations to develop experimental programming and art works.

