USE THE CITY (like you use the internet)

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In 2008, banners hanging from cranes above Liverpool city centre proclaimed one word: 'CULTURE'. There it was: culture, prescribed from on high, descending from heaven.

On the surface, this is a standard case of 'just-don't-get-it' marketing. Like many council-backed placemaking endeavours, it has good intentions but is somehow off the mark. It's kind of funny, in the way that high-profile proclamations that fall flat often are (see also: 'Brexit means Brexit'). The outlook that the banners are an unwitting proponent of is less so however. It is counterproductive to approach culture as something to be *granted,* a gift passively received: it is an attitude which centralises the authority and domain of culture to institutions and private spaces, and undervalues the agency of the people that actually create and sustain it.

For its size, Liverpool has a long history of punching above its weight in the arts. It has more galleries and museums per person than anywhere else in England, a council that remains supportive of culture despite losing half the city budget since 2010, and a DIY attitude that burns throughout its art, music and theatre scene. The city's cultural strength lies in the generosity found within its artistic networks and the willingness to pool expertise, space and resources to make things happen; its lifeblood is a favour economy that is often taken for granted. Liverpool's major art institutions, however, are frequently perceived as peepholes to elsewhere — how the city used to be (through the lens of nostalgia), or how other places are (through the lens of exoticism). They become points of exit from the immediacy of the everyday, rather than sites in which to engage in dialogue with it. How to overcome this? Looking at The Kazimier and FACT's *Refuge* programme, two of Liverpool's strongest cultural moments from 2008 to now, I want to make a case for understanding culture as a form of usership, rather than spectatorship.

The language we use around culture is still predicated on viewership and reception. We talk of visitors, 'private views' (a poisonous phrase soaked in exclusion and subjugation), previews, 'the public'. We could learn a lot from the vocabulary of the internet, which takes usership and accessibility as a given: username, 'peer-to-peer' networks, user-sourced, open source, web*sites* (sites = something to build on, not a finished product to experience). We always talk of *using* the internet, never just visiting it. What if we understood AFK ('away from keyboard') culture in the same terms?

In the shadow of the 'CULTURE' cranes, another city intervention was taking place. One property developer was sitting on many empty spaces in the Ropewalks district and, and secured business rates relief by letting them out at nominal fees for cultural purpose. This scheme has now been discontinued, but it was through this access to cheap central space and the drive to use it that the Kazimier came to be: a multidisciplinary arts and music nexus animated by a willingness to be used as a platform for anything and everything — techno nights, theatre, wrestling. "Sedimentary" is how co-founder Venya Krutikov describes the process by which the space took shape. "It had layers upon layers of weird interventions: architectural, lighting, structure, whatever, that were just byproducts of projects, the space getting used. We inherited one building and eighteen months down the line it had been totally reshaped." The club has now been flattened for prefab flats however, and the Kazimier has been pushed out to a new venue in the North Docks, in the familiar cycle of culture catalysing its own displacement (the developerspeak for this is 'fertilising'). The team's newest venture, however, is a central, independent visual arts space, operating outside of the usual inflexible institutional agendas. Output Gallery's programming, managed by Gabrielle de la Puente (one half of The White Pube), is built on two tight premises: only show new work from people in or from the city, and shape the programme through regular 'input' days, in which anyone can pitch ideas for how the space might be used, from full exhibition concepts to reading groups. For Krutikov, who arrived to the city from London in 2008, that open access was essential: "When we first came to Liverpool, it was totally normal for people to have access to space." Output is an opportunity to reclaim that usage: "Anything that somebody wants to do with the space, it's like let's do that. I'm not precious over it." The gallery moves fast: a new exhibition every few weeks, punctuated with free film screenings and artist talks. In this approach, the curator becomes a producer, and the meaning and value of the space is devolved to its users. It does not seek to showcase or demonstrate culture, but compile and open access to existing cultures.

Output's ability to stay agile is helped by its small scale, and lack of funding body criteria to fill (at least currently). But there are examples of larger organisations weaving direct, useful responses into their programming. Last year, Wu Tsang's *Under Cinema* exhibition at FACT was accompanied by their *Refuge* programme, a series of auxiliary events geared towards making spaces more inclusive. Following a racially motivated assault at a gig, FACT brought in local musician and writer Jon Davies for a panel discussion designed to identify practical steps for progressing forward, including the recognition that designating a space as 'safe' was hubristic: instead, safer spaces are something that all users of a space must collectively work towards every day, every night. Like Alistair Hudson, the director of Manchester Art Gallery, describes when he talks of the 'museum 3.0', the gallery became a 'civic building' with interests in the civic fabric.' To borrow another internet term, inclusively inhabiting cities relies on the understanding that we are all part of a cultural *userbase,* and not just visitors or punters.

It was the urge for spaces, organisations and public resources to become available, to be put to good use, that underpinned the Kazimier and *Refuge*. This attitude is not limited to the 'useful art' that Cuban artist Tania Bruguera champions, "where art's function is no longer to be a space for "signaling" problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions"; it is a systemic understanding of culture as an

ecosystem, a network established, sustained and activated by the input of its users. This network goes beyond the artists, curators, musicians, promoters, venues and funding bodies: it's the whole citywide infrastructure. To borrow one last idea from online thinking: network theory evaluates systems by the strength and number of connections between nodes, not by the size or strength of the nodes themselves. The culture of our cities already function like this, and everybody's a part of it, one way or another. We make our cities by using them, not seeing them. The challenge, then, is to make sure we put them to good use.