

# ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner’ revisited

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Susan Noyes Platt thinks all our consciences should be pricked by the recent Liverpool Biennial

In the famous 1967 movie starring Sidney Poitier, elite white parents (Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy) are confronted with their daughter’s black fiancé as an ‘unexpected guest’. His blackness immediately tests the parameters of genteel hospitality (and much more) for the parents. Fast forward through 50 intense years of racial change, and today we have returned to what curator Lorenzo Fusi calls ‘a highly inhospitable time and place’ as ‘Fortress Europe’ creates barriers to migration, refugees, and simple immigration. All these guests are unexpected and, more than that, unwanted. Fusi’s exhibition included 60 artists in multiple venues who took on this timely and provocative theme.

*The Lift* by Oded Hirsch erupted through a public sidewalk in the centre of a major shopping district. Elmgreen and Dragset’s ‘VIP’ doorway called *I’m on the Guest List Too* forced us to walk around it on our way to the waterfront. The main venue In the Cunard Building was itself laden with significance as the former passenger terminal and headquarters of the famous steamship line. Although the works shown here were disparate in theme and medium, they formed a provocative collective presence. Some of the odder works were Trevor Paglen’s shiny kite-like ‘nonfunctional satellite’ (shown in the catalogue alongside an hilarious postcard to extraterrestrials carried on early NASA missions); homeless people under emergency blankets that become luxury commodities by Pamela

Rosenkranz; and Runo Lagomarsino's wacky macaw garden sculpture which exactly corresponded to the macaw on a 1920s Brazil tourist poster and humorously exposed the contrivances of 'tourist hospitality'. More engaged with the real world today were Suzanne Lacy's conversations about rape with young people, politicians and community leaders ([www.threeweeksinjanuary.org](http://www.threeweeksinjanuary.org)).

Andrea Bowers turned her 'space' over to a group that is encouraging the creation of 'cities of sanctuary'. *City of Sanctuary* in the Biennial had a 'visual identity' created by graphic designer, Sam Wiehl, consisting of a neon sign that glowed at the gallery entrance, and a brochure with graphics that looked like graffiti, as though scrawled on a wall. The brochure oddly, but emphatically, distinguished 'refugees' from 'economic migrants, and illegal immigrants.' Does this mean that the *City of Sanctuary* only accepts political refugees?

My favourite 'unexpected guest' was Nadia Kaabi-Linke's two-screen video *NO* (2012): on one wall a 'congregation' of people repeated NO in response to a facing image of a pair of anonymous lips that asked the inane questions on visa applications for the UK. The religious overtones of the Inquisition are both amusing and chilling, suggesting the historic roots of discrimination. *NO* also represented the opposite of 'power to the people', as the roomful of people were subjected to the arbitrary authority of anonymous bureaucratic regulations. The artist's *Parkverbot* (2010), a bench covered with long spikey nails, making it impossible to sit on, is equally resonant.

At the Bluecoat Gallery, John Akomfrah's brilliant three-screen video, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), examined a particular unexpected guest, Stuart Hall, the well-known cultural theorist. Using Hall's personal photographs, as well as public archives, Akomfrah and his team interwove crucial personal events in Hall's life with the public political events of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights and anti-nuclear activism. Hall's identity was constructed in the spaces of both public oppressions and private tragedies and joys, between collective resistance and personal convictions.

The film was riveting both aesthetically and conceptually. It was complemented by an intense exchange between Hall and David Scott in the catalogue, 'Hospitality's Others: A conversation', which provided the historical trajectory of 'hospitality' for blacks, as slaves, as actors in the tourist industry in the Caribbean, as recruited migrants to the UK after the Second World War, as organized protestors against racism, as multicultural tokens of acceptance, and finally to the current moment as once again targets of racism. (Incidentally the film itself was an unexpected guest at the Biennial, as Akomfrah proposed it directly to the Bluecoat).

Tate curator Sook-Kyung Lee framed the 'Thresholds' exhibition at the Tate Liverpool as an expansion of the 'Unexpected Guest' with this statement: 'We are often placed on thresholds that belong to no particular territory but to indefinite referrals and perpetual passages'. Entirely selected from the museum's permanent collection, the works ranged from Sophie Calle's *The Hotel Room 47*, 1981, based on her aberrant acts of snooping in people's rooms as an hotel maid, to Thomas Hirshhorn's 2003 *Drift Topography*, in which life-size paper soldiers stood in a circle in order to guard packages labelled with the causes of war: 'power', 'financial networks,' 'orientalism,' 'oil', etc.

Another expansion of the main exhibition in a former post office sorting centre, 'City States' invited 13 cities to create exhibitions, thus expanding the 'guests' at the Biennial. The most provocative installations were from Gdansk, Birmingham, Incheon, South Korea, and the 'North Atlantic' (the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland).

The theme of the 'unexpected guest' is particularly appropriate to Liverpool with its history as a major part of the slave trade from 1750 to 1807 and continuing as a major port until recently. Today those historic wharves are museum venues, one of which is devoted to the 'international history of slavery'. Achille Mbembe addressed that irony in his intense catalogue essay, 'The Slave: Figure of the anti-museum?' He declares that slaves, as 'the manure and silt of history', cannot be in a museum, where they enter a space of apartheid that privileges a 'cult of difference, hierarchy and inequality,' in which the 'spirit behind the form as been driven out'. Slaves must instead be in an 'anti museum' that can 'preserve the slave's potential for scandal'. The anti museum is an 'unconditional place of repose and asylum

for all the dregs of humanity – those who attest to the sacrificial system constituted by the history of our modernity'.  
Strong words that rip the façade from art's polite gestures.

The Liverpool Biennial's 'unexpected guests' were closer to Sydney Poitier's elegant performance than to the realities on the ground today, thus confirming Mbembe's statement, but they begin the process of alternatives to the clichés of public media and the popular press with a thought-provoking group of works, only a few of which are discussed here.

## Credits