

The Ambassadors 2001

We were invited to submit proposals for the 2002 Liverpool Biennial. Our proposal, titled *The Ambassadors*, would have consisted of a set of flags of those nations with which HM Government did not maintain diplomatic relations. The flags would have flown from the flagstaffs on the Cunard Building by the river Mersey, near the Tate Gallery and the Pierhead, which has a history as a site not only of arrival and departure, but also of public debate and demonstration.

We wrote to the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office in July 2002, who informed us: ‘There are indeed only two states which Her Majesty’s Government recognises, but with which it does not have diplomatic relations. These are Iraq and Bhutan. Iraq severed diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom in February 1991. There are no relations with Bhutan for administrative reasons, rather than reasons of disapproval. [...] We have trade and cultural offices in Taiwan, but do not recognise the state.’

Had our proposal been accepted, we might have acquired the flags through correspondence and negotiation with representatives of the nations concerned. We hoped, through a process of diplomacy, to obtain in each case official statements on the current situation.

We were equally interested in having the flags made in Liverpool by paying people on a piecework basis. Many such textile workers are women working from home, perhaps within immigrant communities. By ‘outsourcing’ production in this way we might have invoked the deregulated labour relations of the globalised economy, while making visible a symbolic connection between the domestic environment and the public sphere.

As part of Liverpool’s international art biennial, *The Ambassadors* aimed to associate economics, politics and culture in a gesture of temporary but unconditional reconciliation.

In choosing the title *The Ambassadors*, we were referring to the painting by Hans Holbein. *The Ambassadors* (1533) portrays two courtiers of the Tudor period, surrounded by objects symbolising their status and function in the emerging international political and economic geography at the beginning of the rise of the nation state.



Hans Holbein the Younger
The Ambassadors (1533)
Courtesy of the National Gallery, London



Proposed location for *The Ambassadors*
The Cunard Building, Pierhead, Liverpool,
England, 2001