Frey Bentos in Riga: Michael Landy's *Open for Business*

Guy Woodward

Summary

This essay examines *Open for Business* (2018), an installation created by British artist Michael Landy in response to the Brexit referendum of 2016, and exhibited at the Riga Biennial in 2018. The installation's Baltic location provokes exploration of some neglected intersections between Britain's imperial and European histories, and suggests parallels between expressions of nationalism in Britain and in post-Soviet Latvia.

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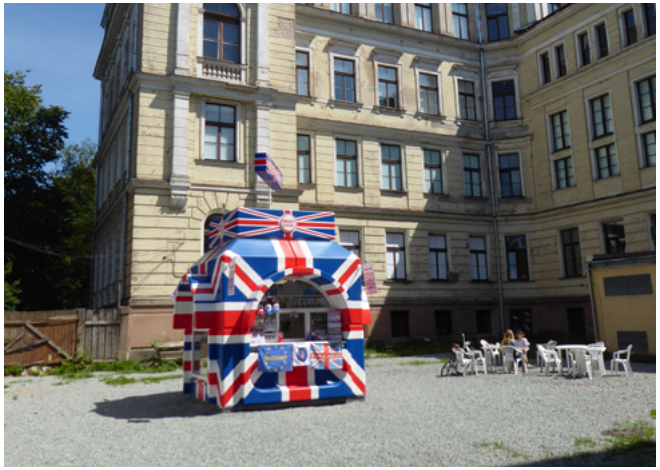
The red, white, and blue kiosk squatted in bright sunshine, in the gravel courtyard of the imposing former Faculty of Biology in the centre of Riga. A sign on its roof reading 'Open for Business' revolved silently and constantly. Its semi-circular windows, inset below curved panels designed to shelter customers from the elements, displayed items including Oxo gravy cubes, cans of Irn Bru, boxes of Weetabix and Scott's porridge oats, packets of Hobnobs, Rich Tea biscuits, Cadbury's Creme Eggs and Tunnock's tea cakes, jars of salad cream, mustard, and Marmite, bottles of HP sauce, vinegar, and Lea and Perrins, Fray Bentos pies, tins of Spam, baked beans, haggis, rice pudding, and golden syrup, bottles of orange squash, and large boxes of Typhoo and PG Tips teabags. One window was papered with the yellowing front pages of newspapers and magazines from the preceding few years. 'Queen Backs Brexit' declared



Michael Landy's *Open for Business*, Riga Biennial, 2018. Photo: the author.

The Sun; the *Scottish Daily Record* hailed First Minister Nicola Sturgeon with the headline 'EU Go Girl'; Germany's *Der Spiegel* pleaded 'Bitte Geht Nicht!' At the front of the kiosk the counter was decorated with the EU flag, amended with the deliberately crass double neologism 'Brexshit' in yellow capitals, and the union flag, bearing the slogan 'We Want Our Country Back'. Between these was placed a carrier bag on which the EU stars encircled an image of a hand giving the middle finger. Baseball caps, T-shirts, mugs, magnets, and other souvenirs, adorned with either EU or British flags, surrounded the hatch. Loudspeakers pumped a languorous brass band cover of 808 State's 'Pacific State' into the courtyard.

Open for Business (2018) was the artist Michael Landy's contribution to the inaugural Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, held from June to October 2018. The Biennial's programme described the participatory installation as 'a humorous critique of the predicament [Landy's] home country has recently manoeuvred itself into', following the referendum of June 2016, as the British Conservative government aggressively sought an economic and political rupture with Europe, while making increasingly humiliating overtures to the rest of the world regarding future trade deals. As the programme put it, 'the proud "nation of shopkeepers" is now desperately looking for a non-isolationist "splendid isolation"'. The contradictions of this policy had long been evident and were embodied in the installation, which showed how a bleak diet of pies and racism had been overlaid by the spuriously patriotic and boosterist rhetoric of free trade.

Landy's kiosk was fully functional; all of the goods displayed were for sale, and white plastic chairs and tables had been set up across the courtyard to enable visitors to drink their cups of tea in relative comfort. In addition to the range of British-produced food and drink, the souvenirs were of Landy's own design and reflected the finely balanced result of the referendum: as he explained, 52% of the items expressed pro-Brexit sentiments (such as the 'Hard Brexit' condoms) while 48% proclaimed fidelity to the EU.[1]

When I visited Riga in mid-July 2018 it was evident that the city remained a popular destination for British tourists, including several raucous stag parties. After watching the quarter final of the football World Cup, in which England had beaten Sweden and sealed an unlikely place in the semi-finals, I left a quiet bar near the Swedish Gate and walked back to my flat in the afternoon sunshine, through the cobbled and heavily restored streets of the Old Town. At one junction a clutch of young English men charged loudly past, one in a football shirt and several with their tops off, beer slopping from stolen glasses onto the ground, unbothered by the effect of their behaviour on those around them.

In the context of deteriorating Anglo-European relations the metaphorical dimensions of this scene—pissed up English lads disturbing the peace of a medieval street refurbished thanks to EU funding—require no explanation. Similarly insistently symbolic, Landy's kiosk likewise performed a discordant intrusion, its gaudy colours and ironic messaging standing out against the Neo-Renaissance backdrop of the nineteenth-century university building. Kronvalda Park, in which the faculty building stood, presented an otherwise idyllic scene, as families strolled or bicycled along tree-lined paths, and quaint, wooden-roofed pleasure cruisers motored along an artificial waterway fringed with lily pads.

In this respect the kiosk presumably fulfilled one of its purposes, to confirm Britain as a badly behaved actor, at

1. Thomas Rackowe Cork, 'Britain is "Open for Business" in the Baltics', *Good Trouble Mag*, 1 June 2018; https://www.goodtroublemag.com/home/open-for-business.

odds with the civilised European context. *Open for Business* troubled me, however. This was partly because I was sick of thinking about Brexit, but I had also begun to question whether art was capable of making any sort of valuable response to the referendum. Addressing a series of attempts by contemporary British artists including Wolfgang Tillmans, David Shrigley, and Anish Kapoor to meet the challenges of Brexit, Juliet Jacques perceptively suggests that their variously trite, superficial, and literal responses simply repeat the failures of British media coverage of the crisis:

> They don't seem to think much about capitalism in general, nor even the class composition of the Brexit vote—which, despite the media narrative about the 'left behind' proletariat voting Leave because of their inherent xenophobia, was largely driven by middle-class business owners and retirees, but you don't see *Guardian* journalists asking people in Reigate or Sevenoaks why they chose to Leave.[2]

Despite Landy's careful delineation of the souvenirs according to voting percentages there was no doubt that this was an anti-Brexit artwork. I could see that the fusion of participatory levity and pointed satire was an attempt to reach beyond the performative post-2016 lamentations familiar from liberal academic and cultural discourses, but at the same time the kiosk seemed to demand a pre-programmed reaction: viewers should agree that Brexit was a terrible mistake, but acknowledge that the artists were on the right side of history and were in no way to blame. In this respect the installation recalled exchanges I have witnessed at academic conferences, where British lecturers apologise with stagy ruefulness to European counterparts for the result of the referendum, thereby emphasising that it has nothing to do with them. The kiosk's gaudy end-of-the-pier aesthetics raised a spectre which lurks over these conversations, of Brexit as a class-specific event, an opportunity for the left-behind in seaside towns and other provincial wastelands to take revenge on technocratic and metropolitan elites. If *Open for Business* successfully drew attention to the potential impediments to trade posed by Brexit in the form of import tariffs and export quotas, it also returned viewers to a series of tired tropes and ultimately served most usefully as a PR opportunity to define British culture against the vote to leave.

This was a shame, since Riga in July 2018 was a productive and immersive location in which to think about nationalist politics and epochal geopolitical change. Outside the biennial, celebrations marking the centenary of Latvian independence were inescapable and to an outsider sometimes a little oppressive: national flags hung from every lamp-post, and the weekend I was there the streets were thronged with families wearing traditional dress, the men in waistcoats and the women with garlands in their hair. Walking between two of the biennial venues I passed an event taking place in Bastejkalna Park, where children danced in traditional dress on a giant stage to the pounding beat of heavy, Germanic-sounding rock.

Latvian attempts to put communism in parenthesis have been resolute: Riga's Museum of the Occupation promotes a narrative that Latvia suffered continuous brutal occupation and oppression from 1940 to 1991 by the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union in turn, before regaining its treasured interwar independence. Curated by an all-female team led by Katerina Gregos, the biennial took a significantly more nuanced approach to Baltic experiences of the Soviet period: its concept

2. Juliet Jacques, 'Brexit: Into the Abyss', *Arts of the Working Class*, 18 November 2019; http://artsofthe workingclass.org/text/brexit.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title 'Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More' was taken from Alexei Yurchak's 2005 anthropological study of the last Soviet generation.[3] Riga itself is credited in this book as an important entry-point for Western culture into the Soviet Union, due to its port. An interviewee named Viktor describes travelling regularly in the mid-1970s from Smolensk in Western Russia to Riga to buy records which he would bring back to Smolensk, copy onto tape and then resell: 'The first record that I bought there was Creedence Clearwater Revival, for which I paid fifty rubles.'[4] At the outset of *Everything Was Forever*, Yurchak introduces a central paradox, that the collapse of the USSR had been 'profoundly unexpected and unimaginable to many Soviet people until it happened, and yet, it quickly appeared perfectly logical and exciting when it began'. In his account, Soviet people discovered that they had always been ready for the collapse, and that the Soviet system itself was 'always felt to be both stagnating and immutable, fragile and vigorous, bleak and full of promise.' He argues that the simplistic binaries of 'oppression and resistance, repression and freedom, the state and the people', which determine much academic and journalistic writing on Soviet socialism, are incapable of acknowledging this paradox; indeed, in their most extreme forms they deny agency to Soviet citizens, assuming that they only subscribed to socialist or communist values because of coercion.[5]

Several exhibits in the biennial engaged with the complex legacies of the USSR. In her ongoing project *(1944–1991) Former NKVD-MVD-MGB-KGB Buildings*, Indrė Šerpytytė is compiling an archive of buildings across Lithuania that were used by Soviet secret services, including the KGB. The buildings are then rendered in miniature form by a traditional Lithuanian woodcarver. At the biennial hundreds of these models were displayed on metal shelves inside a room that could not be entered. Elsewhere in the same venue Liina Siib's *Tallinn-1967* explored an international jazz festival held in the Estonian capital in May 1967, which featured 122 musicians from across the USSR, Poland, Sweden, Finland, and the United States, and was one of the first times that US jazz musicians performed in the Soviet Union. Siib's room featured a small-scale replica of the minimalist-modernist festival stage, on which multi-angled screens displayed uneven and fragmented footage of the event. Turning away from this moment of cross-cultural avant-garde freedom and excitement, it was discombobulating to look down from the windows of the room to Bastejkalna Park below to see couples in traditional dress wandering between the trees.

In this context the intellectual impoverishment of the Brexit debate felt pronounced, and Landy's Spam tableau even less appealing. Returning to *Open for Business*, however, it struck me that some more productive lines of enquiry could emerge from the kiosk itself. The biennial programme notes that kiosks such as the one Landy had redecorated were a familiar sight on Riga's streets in Soviet times, selling newspapers 'only a few pages thick' which 'contained more state propaganda than actual news' and were 'predominantly used to spread the communist ideology'. According to Yurchak however, the kiosk was also a focal point of the intellectual excitement felt in the Soviet Union following the introduction of the perestroika ('reconstruction') and glasnost ('openness, public discussion') reforms in 1985. He notes that between 1987 and 1988 the circulation of newspapers and literary journals newly liberated from censorship 'jumped astronomically', in some cases more than tenfold in one year, and cites letters to the weekly magazine *Ogonek*,

3. The biennial aroused some hostility and suspicion in Riga due to its Russian associations. See Simon Hewitt, 'Riga's first biennial launched by all-female team', *The Art Newspaper*, 12 June 2018; https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/all-female-team-launches-riga-s-first-biennial.

4. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 188.

5. Ibid., 4–5.

in which readers complained of having to queue at a kiosk from 5 a.m.—two hours before it opened—to have any chance of securing copies of the publication.[6]

Since 1991 shifts in consumption patterns have caused a decline in the number of kiosks in Riga. The programme suggests that Landy has 'annexed' this surviving example 'to the United Kingdom by painting it in the colours of the Union Jack flag', an act of recovery and transformation framed intriguingly as an acquisitive colonial manoeuvre. The capture of a redundant Soviet artefact could be construed as a deliberately hollow conquest, but *Open for Business* also gestures towards the historiographical fallacy of 'splendid isolation', by which Britain's imperial history and involvement in European affairs are often separated. A programme footnote helpfully explains that this phrase was coined in the late nineteenth century 'to describe the British policy at that time of avoiding involvement in the affairs of continental Europe.' As historian Jan Rüger argued in 2017, this perception is erroneous but enduring:

> We are used to thinking of Europe and the British Empire as opposite poles … historians and politicians alike have fostered a narrative in which the empire allowed Britain to disengage from Europe, as if the two were clear-cut opposites … This is very much a 20th-century idea, reflecting, more than anything, Britain's changed global position after the Second World War. The imperial project was never isolated from Europe, nor did it allow Britons to isolate themselves from Europe.[7]

As the Brexit referendum and its aftermath have shown, this myth remains rhetorically powerful at home, but outside Britain appears increasingly ridiculous.

6. Ibid., 2, 3.

7. Jan Rüger, *Heligoland: Britain, Germany, and the Struggle for the North Sea* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

This disjunction presents severe difficulties for those concerned with the projection of Britain, of course, and certainly appears to be one of the hurdles which artists such as Landy or Kapoor have failed to clear.

A curious and farcical episode on the cobbled streets of Riga in 1919 provides a striking illustration of the difficulties of projecting Britain in a European context. British military actions in the Baltic region in the aftermath of the First World War were outwardly intended to counter the threat posed by Russian Bolshevism, but should also be understood in the context of a wide range of interventions and pacifications across Europe and the Middle East, leading to an expansion of British territory and commercial interests in the interwar period.

In summer 1919 the British civil servant Stephen Tallents arrived in Riga to take power as Acting Governor of the city. As British Commissioner for the Baltic Provinces he was working in tandem with a military mission which had been assembled to suppress Bolshevik activities in the region. Following the recapture of the capital from the Bolsheviks on 22 May by a force made up of Germans, Latvians, and White Russians, Tallents engineered an armistice signed by representatives of seven different factions at Strasdenhof, twelve miles east of Riga, at 3.30 a.m. on 3 July 1919.

Tallents's period of office lasted only five days; he handed over authority to the Latvian Prime Minister who arrived by ship on the morning of 8 July. In this time he sought to reassure citizens that order had been restored, issuing a proclamation in Latvian, German, and Russian announcing that prison executions had ceased and that 'normal life' would be re-established in Riga, as the German troops retreated. He took up residence in the Ritterhaus where the Bolsheviks had left behind

some examples of propagandist literature (which Tallents appropriated for his collection) and an eighteen-inch-tall statuette of Karl Marx standing in a fireplace. The Anglo-American journalist Walter Duranty, a schoolfriend of Tallents then reporting from the Baltic states for the *New York Times* recalled that 'Tallents had no power, just a couple of destroyers in the river, but he had food, and the might of Britain behind him.'[8] General Hubert Gough, the British General in command of the Allied Military Mission and an avowed imperialist, likewise wrote that 'the White Ensign combined with Britain's then prestige and the self-confidence born of it, was, in those days, sufficient to settle satisfactorily most of the political questions that arose.'[9]

Beginning in 1909 at the age of sixteen, Tallents's civil service career stretched across six decades and several government departments, including the ministries of Trade, Food and Munitions: as secretary to the final Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord FitzAlan, from 1921–22, Tallents was involved in the partition of Ireland.[10] Tallents is best known today, however, as the originator of modern public relations in Britain. As head of the Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office film unit he was instrumental in imperial propaganda campaigns of the interwar period, and he later served as Deputy Director General of the BBC.[11] In Riga however, it seems his skills in the field were still in their infancy. On 4 July 1919 Tallents led his associates on a tour of the city, believing their appearance would stimulate public confidence in the temporary British administration. This did not go to plan. Dressed in their army uniforms and accompanied by a Latvian officer and orderlies, they set out on horseback:

> The horses were of miserable appearance. Hardly had we debouched into the principal street of Riga, when a ringing clang on the stones behind me caused me to turn round and observe a detached horseshoe lying in the gutter. A few yards further on, another shoe followed it. A cavalcade of unshod hacks was clearly not going to inspire confidence in the city, and I cut short the excursion by turning into a small side street, where we dismounted in a fire brigade station and returned to the Ritterhaus on foot.[12]

The collapse of Tallents's poorly-conceived PR manoeuvre is rich in bathetic symbolism: the discordant clang and the indignity of the scrambled retreat are, if anything, only too obviously resonant one hundred years later, as Britain makes an indecorous lunge for the exit door. Like Landy's kiosk, like the promenade of pissed football fans, the scene returns us to the tedious post-referendum trope of Britain as a gaudy and noisy interloper, while more difficult questions of imperial and post-imperial power relations go unanswered.

Guy Woodward is Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Department of English Studies, Durham University. His book *Culture, Northern Ireland, and the Second World War* was published in 2015; essays and articles have appeared in *History Today, Literature and History, Modern Fiction Studies*, and *Paper Visual Art*. He is currently working on a book exploring twentieth-century Irish and British writing on Yugoslavia.

8. Walter Duranty, *I write as I please* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1935), 33–4.

9. General Sir Hubert Gough, *Soldiering On* (London: Arthur Barker, 1954), 195.

10. For more on Tallents's roles in Ireland and in drawing the Latvia-Estonia border see Guy Woodward, 'Outposts of civilisation', *Paper Visual Art Journal*, 10 (Spring 2019): 36–46.

11. Owen Hatherley, *The Ministry of Nostalgia* (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 99; Scott Anthony, *Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain: Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012), 2.

12. Sir Stephen Tallents, *Man and Boy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), 336.