

ART, WORLD, WALES. INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century progressed we have had to become more flexible in our understanding of what art is, and less prescriptive about its role. The essays in this collection chart some of the trends taking place in what might be called 'Art World Wales', in this first decade of a new millennium.

What, who and where are we? If art is a key to unlocking the psychology of a nation at any given time, what, if anything, does our practice here+now show us?

This collection includes essays and papers written over the past three years, some previously published in Planet and several newly completed, which might throw some light onto this question. These constitute my thoughts and responses to art and are not critical analysis or judgements.

The title of the book was partly inspired by an exhibition of young Basque artists at the Museo de Belles Artes in Bilbao in 2002, called in Basque 'Gaur, Emen, Orain' (Today, Here, Now). That exhibition title was chosen deliberately to emphasise the very contemporary nature of the work shown, but also to invoke the memory of three radical artist's groups in the Basque country in the 1960's, bearing the same names. The guiding light of these groups was the great sculptor and essayist Jorge Oteiza, whose death was reported as I am writing this, in April 2003, aged ninety-five. In 1963 Oteiza published a seminal literary work *Quousque tandem...!* ('Is this where we have reached?'). The book was subtitled 'An Effort to Interpret the Basque Soul', an effort echoed in the sculpture of his compatriot Eduardo Chillida. I make no comparable claims for this collection of essays, though I do applaud the awareness of a 'continuing presence' in the contemporary art practice of the Basque's, which I refer to here in a Welsh context. But as the title also suggests, a great deal of the art produced today exists solely in the 'here + now'.

There is a growing tendency to see art, in particular sculpture, as a non-permanent stimulant, unlike the 'built to last' monuments of a more certain age where values were held to be universal and timeless.

Above and beyond all that, the title makes the simple statement, "we are here, this is now".

The essays are therefore about art produced in Wales today, but were not planned as an overview, or for expounding a particular thesis, beyond that. However, it is obvious that the 'here' has implications on the 'now'. History and place has influence on present art practice, and more importantly, on the apparatus of the wider "art world". Here I would like to propose the concept of a "Wales Art World", which though striving to emulate the "London Art World" a lot of the time, is nonetheless completely unique and

has its unfortunate as well as positive aspects. I make an effort to highlight the positive, but cannot avoid raising issue with some things that are negative.

These essays are underpinned by an awareness of postcolonial thinking and the question of whether such a viewpoint can be used to predicate new assumptions for Wales in the twenty-first century, and whether such a condition is revealed in its visual art produce. The first section contains essays and lectures that consider this theme.

The second section is a collection of essays on individual artists, written over a period of time. I had no thematic overview or "agenda" in mind other than to offer some insight into the work and context of these artists, to examine certain clichés such as art and catharsis and art and politics, and to look towards new media, installation, lens based art and performance. It was only on re reading these essays that I realised that 'painting', far from being deeply buried, was pretty near the surface, even when discussing artists who are not known specifically as 'painters'. This highlights the fact that despite the tendency to sideline the practice of painting in the public galleries, it proves to be an abiding philosophical and procedural foundation in the production of art **here + now**.

The three closing essays fall into two parts; each begins with a thesis of sorts and follows with examples of current projects that are instances of ways forward being sought by artists through their practice at the moment in Wales. The first essay looks at public art that challenges traditional expectations; the second features a gallery in Cardiff that promotes emerging and established artists in a confident and 'hybrid' manner. The third deals in a hypothetical way with our internalised mindset and makes a brief analysis of the work of an artist who questions and reveals the inner workings of that mind set.

It is an exciting time, a Venice Biennale Pavilion, a new and innovative art prize in Artes Mundi, a determined drive to finally establish a National Gallery. There are a host of initiatives arising from Cardiff's bid for European Capitol of Culture 2008, which may well secure us a much needed large contemporary exhibition space in Cardiff. Aberystwyth has a new and wonderful Arts Centre and Oriel Davies (known previously as Oriel 31) is vastly refurbished. Oriel Mostyn has plans to enlarge a space that has been at the forefront of exhibiting and awareness raising. Butestreet Artists Studios, at which I am fortunate to have my studio, is a model of endeavour fully realised. Caernarfon has a new arts centre under construction. We maintain and improve, a network of galleries across Wales that many a nation materially much wealthier lack. Cywaith Cymru . Artworks Wales is engaged in an ongoing national project of public art, both commissions and residencies. Eleven artists are currently working on site at the National Botanic Gardens of Wales. Over the past five years, five artists have spent time living and making work on and for, Bardsey Island, Ynys Enlli. The National Eisteddfod visual arts pavilion is becoming more and more a true reflection of professional art practice in Wales. This is a time for jubilation.

Why then do I still feel that we are held back by a lack of confidence in ourselves, in our own self worth? I am not alone in believing that the reason for that lies in the historic legacy of Wales, and in the subsumed effects of colonisation. We do ourselves no favours when we deny that this is so. Art is a tool by which we can prise ingrained tendencies to the surface, expose them, and leave them out to dry.

In the shaping of a new, confident Wales, art has to be given the space and the platform to address it's public, to encourage debate and dissent as well as beauty and appreciation. Art is a human product of a particular place and time, in all its contradictions.... and is one of the only products not governed totally by supply and demand, therefore at its best it is free to 'express opinions', to be revealing, to act as the subconscious of society. Artistic production is always, in that sense, site specific and culturally attached, even when it attempts to be a denial of that concept.

In putting together a collection of writing about contemporary art, I am aware of how little I can include and how much I wish I could include. One day spent looking around the galleries of north Wales, or one day looking around the galleries in Cardiff, and you have an amazing list of diverse and exiting things to see that is comparable to a large metropolis anywhere in the world. Shani Rhys James contrasting with Mariella Nudecker or Tim Davies in Wrexham, David Garner in Aberystwyth. I could go on, Photogallery, Andre Stitt's "Trace" performance space, g39, The Queens Hall, Narberth, Ruthin Craft Centre, Llantarnam Grange, Y Tabernacl in Machynlleth to name but a few.

We no longer need to view ourselves as provincial in any sense, and we should now be launching ourselves outwards, not just celebrating those artists from Wales who have made their reputations outside Wales, both now and in the past, but promoting the vibrant art that is produced **here + now**.

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The new building in Caernarfon mentioned earlier, designed by the Richard Murphy Partnership, the architects of Dundee Contemporary Arts and the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, has one telling architectural detail, one from which it is possible to extract a symbolic trope. A mirror, positioned tactically outside a large window reflects a view of the Menai straits and Ynys Mon, refracting it into the viewers' eye line as they sit in the auditorium. It seems to me that this is the very thing that Art does, it brings into our experience, our line of vision, something that has always been there, but that we cannot always see because of our atrophied position. Something that is ever moving, changing, like water. Something that promises new vistas, giving us a sense of metaphysical movement and change even whilst we ourselves, physically, remain rooted.