

POLITICS OF ENGAGEMENT OR ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICS?

I am not sure whether it is life in these times or my time of life that makes me pose questions in this essay, rather than give answers. Do contemporary artist's engage with politics in any meaningful way in Wales or anywhere else? Or does the practice of art in itself become a form of political engagement?

In different historical periods, artists have been engaged or disengaged with politics, but in many ways, the often un-deliberate act of making art is a political and social statement in itself, in Wales even more so. Until recently, it made little economic sense to be an artist based in Wales. To live and work here is therefore a political decision which has ramifications; specific cultural, economic and political factors influence the artist's work. We clearly see an engagement with social conditions in art from the 1930's onwards, in the work of Evan Walters for example, see his magnificent red breasted "The Communist" of 1932 orating to a crowd. Post war, art in Wales could be praised for it's avoidance of the international trends that were infiltrating into the British Isles, and for the emergence of a particular Welsh painting that became known as "Welsh Environmentalism"ⁱ. On the other hand the missionary zeal of the 56 Group must be applauded for bringing a vigorous Modernism to Wales. It is post-Modern that Wales's artists really 'engage' directly with politics. Artist's like Paul Peter Piech, whose poster prints dealt with social politics, and Ogwyn Davies, who's art consistently raises the issues of Welsh nationalismⁱⁱ, or the implied socialist message in the work of Jack Crabtree are examples.

No longer the trade of 'outsiders', art has become a huge global business, with innovation it's *cri de guerre*, and huge biennale events sprouting in cities all over the globe. To work as artists even in the peripheries of Wales is to be constantly aware of the shadows of these forces. 'Politics', for artist's, often means little more than the promotion of one's own work (and persona) in this art-world, to be 'politically' astute in the methods of production... self-promotion in other words. Am I being cynical if I say that if it is deemed professionally astute to introduce left (or right) wing politics into art, then some artists will do so? To embrace environmental issues, feminist issues, ethnicity, cultural identity - these are essential post-Modern tropes. The choice to be an artist was at one time a political stance, but like

much else today it seems demoted to a 'lifestyle' choice, and an increasingly popular one. Art now is a much more varied and complex area of production compared to what it was half a century ago.

In the 1970's the Beca collective of artists was a somewhat unheralded presence in the art of Wales. Some exhibitions were cancelled due to the 'political' nature of their work in the 1980's, yet by today the late Paul Davies who, with his brother Peter, established Beca, is widely recognised as a radical force in Welsh Art.ⁱⁱⁱ Beca, which included Ivor Davies and later Tim Davies, film-maker Peter Telfer and myself, could be said to have grown out of the 1960's art scenes of London and Paris (Ivor Davies was particularly involved in the 'Destruction in Art' movement of the early and mid sixties) as much as, if not more than, by its base in Wales. But the base in Wales was itself a highly politicised one, following the drowning of Capel Celyn and the protest movements that ensued. The activities of the Welsh Language Society in response to Saunders Lewis's '*Tynged yr Iaith*' (the Fate of the Language) address, warning that the language was reaching a point of no return, were hugely formative for my generation.

The 'performance' aspects of Paul Davies' work, notably the holding up above his head, of a railway sleeper with WN (Welsh Not) written on it, at The National Eisteddfod of Wrexham in 1977, bore similarities to Cymdeithas yr Iaith's dumping of English only road signs on the steps of the Welsh Office. I had myself been involved in a small way in some of these events, an altogether more frightening and thrilling experience, and riskier by far, than painting slogans onto canvasses, (which is what Beca, in effect, were doing). However, as a focusing of energy, as proof that such sensibilities could be accommodated in the world of art in Wales, Beca sounded a clarion call. Davies's protest in 1977 was directed at the Welsh Arts Council, who had organised an 'international' performance art event at the Eisteddfod, including Joseph Beuys and many other 'names' but excluding Welsh artists. In the photograph taken of this event, the renowned Italian artist Mario Merz is seen confronting Davies.^{iv} Is he supportive of this protest on behalf of the dispossessed artists of Wales, or is he dismissive? Whatever the response, for Welsh artists of my generation, it became clear that we did not have to cow tow to the Anglo-American ideologies that dominated art schools like Cardiff and Newport at this time. Cultural politics do not occur in isolation and in the 1970's a widespread iconoclasm in art and popular culture, best illustrated perhaps by the Punk

movement – and in many post Modernist stances taken by artists, encouraged artists of my generation to become more radical.

Throughout the late 70's and the 1980's, this artistic politicization was occurring, and cultural arguments about the language and about devolution were widespread in Wales; not long afterwards of course, socialist militancy breathed its last gasp defending the miners during the strike of 1985. Those artists who were the daughters and sons of miners, often retain their politicized stance. I recall a group of us in Cardiff organised art auctions to support the miners. There was a list of 'just' causes; sympathies lay with the Republican side in Northern Ireland; our 'nationalism' was (like theirs we felt) not a narrow one. It was socialist, republican and international in its scope. It supported minorities under threat worldwide.

These sensibilities, unfashionably "nationalistic" or fashionably "culturally specific" (the politics of place) are still in evidence amongst that generation. The Beca members continue as individuals to wander occasionally down that path of protest, as do others who might well be Beca members in spirit; David Garner, a miner's son, at once springs to mind, and Carwyn Evans, (a Welsh speaker from rural west Wales) but also others, less obviously so. It has become more acceptable to dabble in 'issues', as I said, in this post Modern climate, and artists who do so, particularly those coming from the 'minorities', have gained international reputations. These artists, like many in Wales find that their 'formation' has enabled them to view the world from a marginalised perspective.

With his charismatic presence, theoretical lectures, blackboard diagrams and much-mythologised persona, the aforementioned German artist and 'activist' Joseph Beuys was an influence in the 70's and 80's too. Despite the fact that he was not actually present at the Wrexham Eisteddfod, Beuys had shown considerable interest in the 'Celtic Fringe'.^v (Scotland, Ireland and England not Wales, it seems). In a sense, Paul Davies has become that Beuysian inspirational figure for political art in Wales. Retrospective analysis has augmented his position, for example the ongoing research by Heike Roms of Aberystwyth University's Centre for Performance Research sites his 'performace' at Wrexham as a key moment in Wales's significant history of Performance Art. As Purchaser for CASW in 2003 I acquired his last drawing, the diagrammatic "Mappa Mundi" (1993) for the collection, and it is now housed at the National Museum, Cardiff. Other artists have since come to Wales from politicised background 'formations'. Both André Stitt

and Paul Seawright are originally from Northern Ireland, and their early works were direct responses to the unavoidable political reality of Ulster. Performance artist Stitt is internationally known for his Akshuns, and with “Dwr” in 2005/06, has gone on to engage with that motif of Welsh political art, Tryweryn, by literally delving into the murky waters to produce a simple yet compelling short film that reminds one of an epidiascope penetrating into the entrails of the human body. Seawright too, has photographically commented on industrial decline in the south Wales Valleys (with which he represented Wales at the Venice Biennale 2003) before going on to evoke the barren and empty landscape of Iraq. Rabab Ghazoul is an Iraqi born artist, now resident in Cardiff who feels empowered to deal with her own issues of cultural identity in a place where such questions are part of the currency of discourse. In Wales she can relate to the issues of language loss and identity that she herself feels, having been exiled from Iraq from a very young age.

Tryweryn as a motif and metaphor has been a subject for Tim Davies, David Garner, John Meirion Morris, Marian Delyth, Ivor Davies, Aled Rhys Hughes, Carwyn Evans, Tim Page and many others. This piece of water that drowned a community, and which is still out of the control of Wales’ Assembly Government, galvanised poets, writers visual artists. My own contribution to the debate, “Dam/Pont” is a painting in black and white that suggested that the ‘dam’ built across the river Tryweryn could also operate as a ‘bridge’ to a new future. The Tryweryn episode led circuitously to the establishing of the National Assembly for Wales, but significantly, it also had mythic resonance. The drowning of land has long been a motif of folklore in Wales, and so, this historic event echoes mythical events that form some of our ‘collective memories’. Five miles from Llyn Celyn lies Llyn Tegid, a natural lake that has just such a story attached to it.

Tim Davies, born in Pembrokeshire and spiritually attached to his grandparents’ home, the once fishing village of Solfach, has a deeply felt political awareness in his work. “Black Black Walls” of 1993, first brought him to attention in Wales when it won a prize at the National Eisteddfod in Neath in 1994, but which had appeared at the East International exhibition in Norwich previously. Lumps of coal, 28,000 in all, are pierced and strung up in rows, much like bead curtains - forming a series of screens hanging from ceiling to floor. They are striking as objects in a white space, but they are also reminders of each job lost in the south Wales coal industry under Thatcher's policies. The coal is reduced "to an impotent, decorative element,

like black coral threaded on string" as Dr Ann Price Owen has said^{vi}. Work, or the lack of it and the loss of social cohesion that goes with unemployment, are recurring themes in Davies's work.

"Capel Celyn" of 1997 is a floor piece made up of five thousand cast wax nails inspired by the discovery of one rusty five inch nail which Davies reclaimed one rainless summer from the dried up bed of the Tryweryn reservoir in north Wales. The work can be viewed purely as a self contained piece of art, austere and haunting; yet a deeper meaning can be found hidden under the outward appearance of an international style. Like the culture and history of Wales, submerged like the village of Capel Celyn, the deeper meaning needs to be worked at. Visitors to Wales (or viewers of the work) or indeed inhabitants, often remain completely ignorant of this national story and Tim Davies's work could be interpreted as an illustration of this process of rediscovery, in that it makes visible this cultural phenomenon that is so easily overlooked.

"Capel Celyn" won the Mostyn Open purchase prize in 1998, but before that it had been enthusiastically viewed in an exhibition also called 'Capel Celyn' in the Spacex Gallery in Exeter in 1997. This surprised the artist somewhat; proving that the mythic nature of the work and the historical events it alluded to (supported by accompanying text) could be well received outside Wales. This is not art that is simply "about" one country's history, nor does it hijack history in order to create a "message". The message is inherent and self-contained, and therefore universal. It is also minimalist in the sense that it is pared down completely to one element, and that element is repeated over and over in a labour intensive process, which the artist undertakes himself. Its politics go further, they question the supposed 'content-less' ideology of Minimalist art. The viewer sees a "field" of wax nails, a carpet that seems to hover in a ghostly way across the gallery floor. Beyond that, they interpret the meaning of the piece, aided by its title and the statement made to go with it. In the catalogue essay for Spacex, curator Alex Farquharson writes; *"Art on the margins, can still act for the community in place of absent governmental or media representation, and one cannot help feeling that in Davies' hands what began as a single rusty nail that was duplicated by wax casts, has taken on the votive function of a candle in a church for the lives dispossessed at Capel Celyn"*.

The "Returned Parquet" piece made for Poustina Earth Art project in Belize in 1999 emphasizes the process of political awareness that is part and parcel

of Davies' work. Looking out for new materials to use, Davies found a pile of salvaged mahogany blocks in a yard outside Swansea. Realizing the significance of these blocks - once the floor of a grand house in south Wales, made from wood cut down by slave labour in Central America before being shipped to Europe, perhaps via the port of Cardiff. He made a decision to ship it all back to Belize. Aided by an Arts Council of Wales grant, he duly shipped the blocks back to the forest. There he laid them out as a pathway, where they remain, gradually being truly reclaimed by the undergrowth and the termites. Another work that shows his response to current events is the video piece "Drumming" of 2003, where a drum is beaten loudly and continuously. Made to be placed near the famous statue "Drummer Boy" by Sir William Goscombe John in the National Museum & Gallery, Cardiff, it shows us how art reflected its time, a propagandist drum, beating a roll call to arms that is repeated today as an ironic comment about the propaganda that once again has taken us to war.

In a series of postcard 'interventions' (a series of twelve was purchased for CASW in 2003) Tim Davies has turned his attention to that Welsh icon of the tourist postcard, the Welsh Lady. In these found postcards, the central figure or group of figures are meticulously removed, leaving a neat and empty, yet recognizable silhouette. Getting rid of these outmoded views of Wales, he seems to say, lets us see the reality that surrounds them.

Also on the purchased list in 2003 was a series of early Peter Finnemore work where political engagement was most obvious. The work, "Lesson 56 - Wales" (1998) is a series of six C.Type colour prints on aluminium, and feature pages from his grandmothers school history textbooks. They contain such gems as; 'When speaking of England it is understood that Wales is also meant.' and show the majority of the atlas coloured the pink of the British Empire. Finnemore has gone on to represent Wales at the Venice Biennale exhibition of 2005 with a series of humorous yet telling short films.

David Garner began his political engagement in his 'milltir sgwar' (square mile) of mining town Blackwood, dealing with industrial decline, new short stay technology industries and his own father's death from pneumoconiosis contracted from year's underground. His "Political Games 2" (1995) is in the CASW collection, an iron target filled with discarded work boots. "Pockets of Resistance" (2003-04) is a huge tarpaulin pocket covered with pockets from everyday garments, and was first exhibited in the exhibition FACT, held in a disused shop in Swansea in 2004. Names of various

resistance movements are attached in fabrics associated with women's clothing, together with the iconic face of the first female suicide bomber, Wafa Idris. "They Shoot Children Don't They?" 2003-04 is a welded steel framed globe in which a video monitor is suspended which repeats a five minute loop of footage extracted from the banned Arab film, "Jenin Jenin". The extract is a monologue from a twelve-year-old girl, Najwa, as she scampers over the bombed remains of a Palestinian village. The original film was directed by Mohammed Bakri, and is dedicated to its producer, Iyad Samudi who was shot and killed shortly after its completion. Behind the monitor is a suicide bomber's vest on a clothes hanger, as if ready for use, (and made following instructions taken from the internet). A thick rope coils around the lower half of the globe, and unravels across the floor. Another work; "Intelligent Information?" (2004) is a single line L.E.D display that runs a continuous message. What does it mean? Is it poetry? It turns out to be a tactic deployed by the U.S Department of Home Security, giving useful information in airport departure lounges. One of the telltale signs for recognising a terrorist bent on suicidal action apparently is; 'Behaviour is consistent with no future'.

This is not an issue for one people and one place only, it is global - the rope that binds us is unravelling. The work of artists like Garner points the finger at this continuing human folly. It is cultural and political imperialism, multi-nationals and greed that should legitimately be described by that line, their behaviour is indeed 'consistent with no future'. The future looks bleak for us all, and the threat to our environment by far exceeds the threat of terrorism.

Whether art can make a difference is probably a moot point, but without art that challenges, then we have even less to look out for that will be of interest in this homogenised world. Art offers alternatives to the tired imagination, so that some recipients of the 'message' can gain another view on the world, one that might indeed effect the real politics at some point. Over the course of the twentieth century art had become largely removed (and has removed itself) from the overtly political concerns of the day to day. An ideological conspiracy in effect, isolated art in institutions much like 'ivory towers'. Today, more and more artists (in Wales and elsewhere) are becoming genuinely engaged with the wider community and with issues such as the environment. It seems that right now, we are of the generation who can see the end, truly the catastrophic end of civilisation as we know it within a century - this 'political' reality - of global warming, surely becomes the theme of Art. As more people question the way we live and see that a

change is inevitable, voluntarily or not; they see the art that was practised in the West (and now globally exported) to be part of the same destructive self-indulgent system. It becomes clear that alternative ways of thinking and being must be offered by artist; this is the greatest political challenge of all.

ⁱ See *The Visual Culture of Wales* 3 vols. Peter Lord (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1998-2000-2003).

ⁱⁱ See *The Layers of a Landscape* by Shelagh Hourahane pp57, *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala (Bridgend, Seren Books, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Maps, Myths and the Politics of Art* by Shelagh Hourahane pp 67, *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala (Bridgend, Seren Books, 1999).

^{iv} See pp 66 *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala (Bridgend, Seren Books, 1999).

^v See *Josef Beuys and the Celtic World*. Sean Rainbird (London, Tate 2005).

^{vi} See *Fire* Anne Price-Owen pp 50, *Process* (Bridgend, Seren Books, 2002).