

ARTicle

CULTURAL LIFE ON THE EDGE

ART in WALES II: Politics of Engagement
IWAN BALA *artist & writer*

IRON and STEEL
ARTISTS *on their METTLE in WALES*

DYNAMIC DUO
RAUL SPEEK *profiles GILBERT and GEORGE*

IRON *and* STEEL ARTISTS *on their* METTLE *in* WALES

Two recent events highlight the importance of Art in Wales – and of that Art for the country’s European context. Ebbw Vale welcomed the pink tent of the National Eisteddfod on its former steelworks site – the first time this Welsh cultural bonanza has been held in the town since 1958. Closer to ‘home’, Kidwelly Castle in the Carmarthenshire marshes hosted the 6th International Conference on Contemporary Cast Iron Art, ‘Ironstone’: a collaboration with the Arts Council of Wales, Sculpture Cymru and Cadw.



Sacred cow? Eisteddfod 2010 entrance foyer Image © Ian McDonald



Hale-Bopp comet on a frosty night #6 © Paul Preston

While ‘Ironstone’ showed a fairly straightforward face of modern art within a historic landscape – familiar now from stately homes and historic museum extensions Europe-wide – the evocative castle ruins provided an exceptional backdrop to the sculptures. Its ‘cast list’ included artists from as far away as the USA and Lithuania (this in a month in which Baltic artists also graced St Davids Cathedral with bronze icon and photography exhibitions as part of an international Artswave celebration).

The Art element of Eisteddfod 2010, by contrast, was surreal: from the didactic red-and-white cow that greeted us in the foyer (a relative of such recent urban interventions as the Berlin Bears and Liverpool’s Superlambananas) to the arts ‘pavilion’ itself, Y Lle Celf, housed below ground in the defunct steelworks’ vast former annealing basin. This was an arts venue at the more cutting-edge end of European art provision.

And metalwork won out here as well, with Haverfordwest artist Paul Preston receiving a Craft and Design Award for his exquisitely-crafted jewellery designs, which impressed the judges with their ‘lightness of touch, and humour, not often seen’ at such events.

As if to underline the importance of this unique festival, another Pembrokeshire artist, Tim Davies, in a recent talk at Oriol y Parc, recalled the weighty honour of wearing the Fine Art Gold Medal for a whole day at the 2003 Eisteddfod in Powys (an honour passed for part of the day to his young son – dwarfed by the medal).



Y Lle Celf, in the former steelworks, Ebbw Vale Image© Ian McDonald

In this edition, we conclude Eisteddfod-exhibitor Iwan Bala’s account of Welsh art with a look at the politically engaged art of the 1970s and 80s, and Solva artist Raul Speek outlines his vision of bringing two of Britain’s most challenging artists to Wales to exhibit for the first time.

ART *in* WALES II

IWAN BALA *artist & writer*

Iwan Bala gives an overview of political Welsh art from its 1970s inception to the present. At this year's Eisteddfod, Bala's *Field Notes* (detail on front cover) hinted with surreal cartography at the artistic talent to be found in West Wales.

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 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 that 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 1930s onwards, in the work of Evan Walters for example: his magnificent red-breasted *The Communist* of 1932, orating to a crowd. Post war, art in Wales could be praised for its avoidance of the international trends that were infiltrating the British Isles, and for the emergence of a particular style known as 'Welsh Environmentalism'.¹ 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: Paul Peter Piech, whose poster prints dealt with social politics; Ogwyn Davies, whose art consistently raised the issues of Welsh nationalism;² and the implied socialist message in the work of Jack Crabtree.

No longer the trade of 'outsiders', art has become a huge global business, with innovation as its *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 artists 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 more varied and complex area of production compared to what it was half a century ago.

In the 1970s 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 1980s, yet by today the late Paul Davies who with his brother Peter established Beca, is widely recognised as a radical force in Welsh Art.³ Beca – which included Ivor Davies and later Tim Davies, film-maker Peter Telfer and myself – could be said to have grown out of the 1960s art scenes of London and Paris (Ivor Davies was particularly involved in the 'Destruction in Art' movement of the early and mid-60s) as much as, if not more than, its base in Wales. But this base 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 Welsh was reaching a point of no return, were hugely formative for my generation. In the book of essays, *Certain Welsh Artists*, which I compiled in 1999, I describe a 'custodial aesthetics' in the work of several artists in Wales, artists who one way or another promote a notion of Welsh identity in their work.

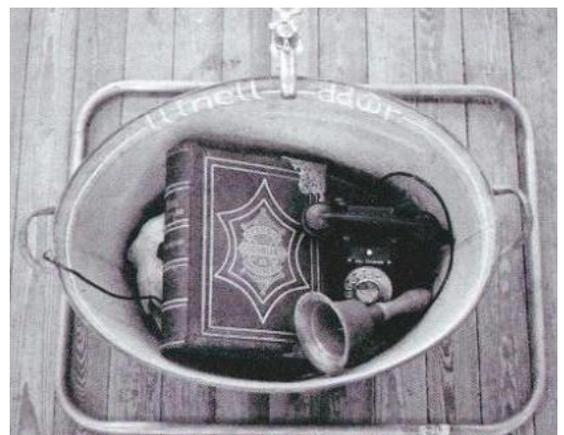
POLITICS *of* ENGAGEMENT *or* ENGAGEMENT *with* POLITICS

Much of this notion of 'custodianship' comes from the realisation that as a people (Welsh speakers in particular) we are burdened with the responsibility of keeping memory, heritage and identity alive.

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, 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' protest in 1977 was directed at the Welsh Arts Council, which 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.⁴ 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 kowtow 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 1970s 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 1970s and 80s, this artistic politicisation occurred, and cultural arguments about the language and about devolution were widespread in Wales; not long afterwards, of course, socialist militancy breathed its last defending the miners during the 1985 strike. Those artists who were the daughters and sons of miners often retain their politicised 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 scope. It supported threatened minorities worldwide.

These sensibilities, unfashionably 'nationalistic' or fashionably 'culturally specific' (the politics of place) are still evident 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. It has become more acceptable to dabble in 'issues', as I said, in this post-Modern climate, and artists who do so, particularly those 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.



Tryweryn

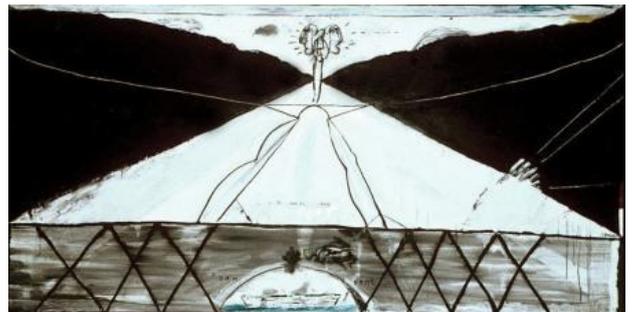
© David Garner

IWAN BALA *artist & writer*

ART in WALES

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 70s and 80s too. Despite the fact that he was not actually present at the Wrexham Eisteddfod, Beuys had shown considerable interest in the 'Celtic Fringe'.⁵ (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 cites his 'performance' at Wrexham as a key moment in Wales's significant history of Performance Art. As Purchaser for the Contemporary Art Society for Wales in 2003, I acquired his last drawing: the diagrammatic *Mappa Mundi* (1993) for the collection, and it is now housed at the Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum of Wales, 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 at a 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 and 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'.



Dam/Pont

© Iwan Bala

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

2. See *The Layers of a Landscape* by Shelagh Hourahane, p57, in *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala (Bridgend, Seren, 1999).

3. See *Maps, Myths and the Politics of Art* by Shelagh Hourahane, p67, in *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala.

4. See *Certain Welsh Artists* ed. Iwan Bala (Bridgend, Seren, 1999), p66.

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

an APPRECIATION of the WORK of GILBERT and GEORGE

Solva artist and 'friend to the stars', Raul Speek explains why he wants the Spitalfields-based artists to exhibit in Wales.

From the early 1960s onwards, two artists with their roots firmly in the 'local' have occupied a prominent place on the international contemporary art scene: the Spitalfields-based duo of Gilbert and George. The former Italian by birth, the latter hailing from Devon, they met when studying at St Martin's School of Art, London, in 1967.

I am constantly intrigued that their work has always had a double aspect. On the one hand, they are 'over the top', extravagant, outrageous, etc.; on the other, if you ask art students anywhere in the world you will be amazed at the level of wonder, respect and influence that they inspire. I firmly believe that the significance of their achievement – especially for young artists – is still growing, and it is for this reason that I am campaigning to have the pair stage their first exhibition in Wales. A fitting venue would, to my mind, be Amgueddfa Cymru National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, with its international reach, exemplified by the hosting of Britain's largest arts prize, Artes Mundi – see *ARTicle* No. 5 – and its pending new 20th-century contemporary art exhibition spaces. I envisage them coming to Cardiff for a day, beginning with a boat trip where they could stop in places of their preference, perhaps making small 'flash' performances, before arriving at the Museum. I know, for example that they are familiar with, and admire, the work of William Burges, the architect of the rich, extravagant Victorian sections of nearby Cardiff Castle.



Gilbert and George with Raul in their studio in Spitalfields, East London

ARTicle has been going for over a year now; however, when I helped to establish this digital magazine for the arts in Pembrokeshire, I immediately thought of Gilbert and George as a suitable subject. *ARTicle* is intended to serve as a 'window' to what happens on the local and national Welsh art scene today, and uses a force of globalisation – the Internet – to promote a local cause: that of artists within their communities and beyond. To me, Gilbert and George represent the progressive possibilities of globalisation, of how technology and the mass media affect the way in which our society evolves. Their creative output, since the very moment they first exposed themselves to their audience, has been a rollercoaster of new ideas and projects in perfect tune with their historical, religious, political, artistic and cultural contexts – and, significantly, with their own local area of Spitalfields in the East End of London where, famously, they have chosen to live, almost like anthropologists in this respect.

Having known them for many years, I recently had the opportunity of seeing their studio and work in progress once again. I am always interested to discover their latest methods and approaches to creativity. I possess a large collection of Gilbert and George 'memorabilia', and would say that over the years

DYNAMIC DUO

by RAUL SPEEK *artist*

the quality and perfection of their printed works, publicity, information, etc. has been continually increasing. The same amount of attention is given to any aspect of the way they present themselves to their public: from the way they cross a right leg over a left knee, to the choice of fabric for a suit, the manner in which they alternate with each other in conversation, to the designs they choose for their publications.

One of the best examples of the last-named is the design of the catalogue for their recent large retrospective exhibition at Tate Modern. Entitled *The Complete Pictures, Volume 1 and Volume 2*, volume 1 covers work from 1971 to 1988, and volume 2 from 1998 to 2005. I would ascribe to these enormous books a similar amount of input, time and love as any major engineering project by a master such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and am proud to own a set. Furthermore, whenever I am allowed to see their work in progress in the studio, I can't help but become overwhelmed by the discipline and focus invested in how they plan their future projects.

Since moving to Pembrokeshire, I travel less and less to London. I had not seen Gilbert and George personally for a few years, but recently went for the sole purpose of saying 'hello' and to see if they would allow me to take some photographs for this article.

As I approached their door, they were coming out for lunch, and kindly invited me to join them. We walked across the road for 150 metres; suddenly we entered a very smart contemporary café, which I immediately recognise as the premises of my first ever studio in the UK, at the beginning of the 1990s! At that time there were about 400 artists struggling to make a living in the area surrounding Spitalfields Market, including Tracy Emin and many others. I realised that in the last ten years, the periphery of the City of London has been embarked on a hysterical 'marathon' for new contemporary design and development: everything seemed to revolve single-mindedly around the holy materials of glass and stainless steel. I even recognised the owner of the café, because he has hosted the TV programme *Master Chef*.

On the way back, Gilbert and George decided to show me around their studio and their new work; to my surprise they have continued to move with the times, surrounding themselves with the latest technology available for the visual artist today. I was struck that this was probably what I was missing in the contemporary art scene in our peripheral location in Wales. In the case of the new work by Gilbert and George, I say again: they are in perfect tune with the times; whatever new cultural/economic fluctuation occurs in London, they decide to inhabit it.

I am convinced that their participation in an exhibition in Wales will do wonders for the cultural, artistic life of my adopted home country, and would welcome any suggestions from interested parties as to how we can make this a reality.



Gilbert and George with maquettes of future exhibitions © Raul Speek???

HIGHLIGHTS

ARTicle RECOMMENDS for the AUTUMN

- PureART Gallery in Milford's next show is a selling exhibition of work by Graham Sutherland including watercolours, drawings, original prints and ceramics. Showing from 2 - 23 October, join them for drinks for the opening between 10 am to 5 pm on Saturday 2 October. Call 00 44 (0)1646 694591 or email gallery@artpure.co.uk for more details.
- Caroline Jones' bold and colourful work will be on show at Art Matters' White Lion Street Gallery in Tenby from 1 - 28 October. More details are on 00 44 (0)1834 843375 or email info@artmatters.org.uk
- The main gallery and Oriol Fach at Oriol Q at Queens Hall in Narberth will be showing drawings by Catherine Fairgrieve and sculptures by Andrew Griffiths until 23 October. More details on 00 44 (0)1834 869454 or by emailing the manager Lynne Crompton on lynne-orielq@tiscali.co.uk
- Tenby Museum and Art Gallery's current exhibition runs until 10 October. David Bellamy and Jenny Keal's 'The Spirit of Pembrokeshire' is a celebration of these two artists' work. The exhibition is open everyday from 10am to 5pm. For more details call 00 44 (0)1834 842809 or email info@tenby-museum.co.uk
- 'Angle to Angelsey' – an exhibition of paintings and collages of Welsh life and landscape is on at Pembroke Dock library between 9:30am and 5pm from 3 September.
- Fishguard's West Wales Arts Centre features work by David Tress and James MacKeown through October 2010. For further details, call 00 44 (0)1348 873 867.
- Further afield, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/The National Library of Wales Aberystwyth is showing the remarkable photographs of Cardiff-born Patricia Aithie and her husband Charles, whose images of Yemen are on show from 25 September until 2 April 2011. For details, call 00 44 (0)1970 632 800 or visit www.llgc.org.uk

WELCOME

to Oriol y Parc Landscape Gallery's new artist in residence. Korean artist Mimi Joung will be working at the gallery September - December 2010. Mimi's recent work for project-based exhibitions has been inspired by her interest in materials and their history. Visitors will be able to view works in progress and attend a series of talks and workshops throughout the residency. Follow Mimi's progress on her blog: takelandscapewithyou.blogspot.com otherwise contact Oriol y Parc on 00 44 (0)1437 720392, or visit www.mimijoung.com for more details.

LOOKING FORWARD

EVENTS

- St Davids Studio Gallery's exhibition in the run up to Christmas is the textile and embroidery work of Amanda Wright. Call 44 (0)1437 720 648 or email info@stdavidsstudiogallery.co.uk for more details.
- Dorothy Morris is running Taster Classes (one per month) from her new Little Mezzanine Gallery in Pembroke every fourth Sunday of the month. The first one starts on Sunday 24 October, and is called, 'Batik for Beginners', runs from 10.30 am to 3.30 pm and costs £25 for the day including materials. Only 6 students, so first come first served! Please telephone Dorothy on 01267 267652 or call into the gallery and put your name down.
- Check out Wales' Cultural Olympiad commission, Marc Rees' Adian Avion on www.artiststakingthelead.org.uk

LISTINGS

- ARTists PEMBROKESHIRE's website is now live, and includes a constantly updated listings page, as well as giving visitors the opportunity to pass on their 'hot tips' for events in the county. Visit www.artpembrokeshire.co.uk
- Information on Oriol y Parc's events can be found on www.orielyparc.co.uk or by calling 00 44 (0)1437 720392.
- *Western Telegraph*, weekly local newspaper, out on Wednesdays, also *County Echo*, based in Fishguard, the *Tenby Observer* and the *West Wales Mercury* covering the Milford Haven area.
- *Pembrokeshire Life*, published monthly and *Pembrokeshire Country Living*, six editions published each year.
- Arts events can also be found in the listings of www.artswales.org.uk, www.bbc.co.uk/wales/southwest, www.eventsinpembrokeshire.co.uk, www.visitpembrokeshire.com or www.pembrokeshire-online.co.uk
- And if you want to track down the artists yourselves, see Pembrokeshire County Council's Art and Craft Guide 2009 available to pick up throughout the county and to download on www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk (type 'Pembrokeshire Art and Craft Guide' into the search box).

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