

## ISLANDS OF THE FLOATING WORLD

Imagine a great ocean covering the globe - its surface uniform and featureless. Some islands might break the surface, but unconnected, like rafts, they float, skimming the surface and making barely a ripple. Occasionally there are other islands on which grow great trees, which hold firm to their roots and stand proud of the water - their presence causes ripples, eddies and cross currents. There are cultures like this, artists like this, whose roots have not come adrift, and who stand proud of the engulfing deluge and create new patterns.

This is one metaphor that's been used to describe globalisation and the resistance to it. It's tempting to add to this scene the sight of western curators roaming the globe like latter-day conquistadors seeking out new 'discoveries'. Under this homogeneous ocean, the continuity of cultural diversity is being threatened. How here in Wales can change be embraced without losing the threads of continuity that encourage cultural autonomy? Is this not a question being asked all over the world? The Cuban critic Gerardo Mosquera has said; *'Every time the word 'globalisation' is mentioned, one tends to imagine a planet in which all points are interconnected in a reticular network. In fact, connections only happen inside a radial and hegemonic pattern around the centres of power, where the peripheral countries (most of the world) remain disconnected from one another, or are only connected indirectly via - and under the control of - the centres.'*<sup>1</sup>

Artists as individuals have to embrace change; they become nomadic either through choice or by default, and head for the centre. Can they, in the process keep a grip on their roots? Put simply, what is the effect of globalisation? Is it indeed anything new for artists to have to migrate to the metropolitan centres? If these artists come from culturally specific perspectives, how does changing their specific location affect their work? If art honestly reflects life-experience, surely there must be some effect. Is this good? Is this bad? And what of those cultures left behind? When artists relocate from periphery to centre, does that mean that they themselves are any less peripheral within that centre? The Artes Mundi Prize may help us focus on these questions and it is fitting that it is a prize offered by a country on the periphery of Europe, aiming for a place nearer the centre.

Wales, for a small country with a population less than many a large city, is a complex organism that has a complex physical and psychological structure, a defining feature of which is a living language that pre-dates English. Naturally then, it has a complex art-world. Often these complexities manifest themselves simply as the typical 'complex' of an 'imagined community' beset by internal divisions. Navigated and negotiated however, they make Wales a stimulating environment for creative artists, one whose experience has much to offer in the inter-national cultural discourse.

Artists work in Wales as everywhere, and in growing numbers. I am just one of them, and I am writing from that viewpoint. Being an artist in Wales is financially difficult. Being an artist anywhere is difficult I guess, but I can't be sure. It might not be as hard here as we think it is, nor as good elsewhere as we think it might be. Being an artist in Wales means you may have to clarify that assertion. What does it mean to be a 'Welsh' artist, as opposed to 'artist'? What does it mean to be 'Welsh'? In my particular case it means being concerned about this place, its history, both truth and fabrication, and its present realities. It means being tied to a place, a position that is an entrapment in one sense and a source of freedom in another. But that's just one definition of what being 'Welsh' might mean. Being an artist on the other hand might mean you should do, and be encouraged to do, whatever the hell you like.

When I arrived from rural Welsh speaking Merioneth, at Cardiff's School of Art in the mid 70's

I gradually developed a dual identity, hopping from one world to the other, pretending, and not always succeeding, to be fully part of both, a condition not unique in places where cultural difference exists. I still live and work in Cardiff and I am now possibly more adept at cultural duality. My wife was born in Cardiff of a second-generation Greek mother and an exiled Greek father and our shared life-experience is very different to that of my parents. In my work I have explored notions of identity, nourished by several extended visits abroad, in particular several months as artist in residence at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in 1990 and 1993. These concerns have brought an awareness of, and interest in, similar issue based artists in other marginalized regions of the world. In 1999 I compiled and edited a book of essays called *Certain Welsh Artists*. Different though the artists featured are, they display a commitment to a particular place and share at least a version of a common 'Welsh' identity which remains in their work in varying degrees of intensity, a phenomenon for which I coined the term *custodial aesthetics*. These artists were all born in Wales, they either speak Welsh or are from Welsh speaking families. Such 'certainties' are increasingly under siege, and when deterritorialism becomes a buzzword in this 'floating world'; a notion of 'rootedness' seems of ever more value, and yet it has caused resentment within Wales because of its implied exclusiveness. The horticultural metaphor can equally be taken as a warning against roots that strangle and restrain, causing the reactionary fears of 'outsiders' towards 'insiders', or of the 'indigenous' towards 'incomers'.

These issues and their negotiation are of interest and concern to me; this therefore becomes my perspective as an artist and writer, but that perspective is not a requisite of being an artist in Wales. 'Place' need not be the subject, even if it is often the subtext. Place need mean nothing more than the location of opportunity, and artists in Wales as everywhere, are unified in their desire for that. Where is the supporting framework and the mediation between artist and public, both within this place and with the world outside? What opportunity is there to breach a perceived 'glass ceiling', that mid-career and earlier, hinders progress?

To be realistic, it has to be understood that Wales is not particularly wealthy and is encumbered with an inherited attitude to the visual arts that is peculiarly British in its origin and has accrued a few attitudes of its own along the way. It has been said that Wales manifests a 'Despite Culture'. Professor Jane Aaron in a lecture given at the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 2003<sup>2</sup> argues that Wales' culture survives best when up against the wall and that there's a tendency to relax when things are going well. The language in Wales survives 'despite' centuries of persecution; the idea of Wales survives despite years of erosion. The visual arts by the same token seem to survive 'despite' the commercial sectors relative indifference, despite (until recent revision) the disparagement of art historians, and despite the lack of a proper infrastructure or mainstream support. Add to this a steady haemorrhaging of talent in the years gone by and it becomes a wonder to realise that (despite all this) we have so many things to celebrate in our visual art world.

Artists, we know, move around, and rooted here as I am, I see work from all quarters and have participated in many events here and abroad, site-specific installations and wall hung exhibitions. I know that many artists are almost completely nomadic, living from commission to commission, performance or event, travelling the world. Networks exist, contacts are made and a web of interlinking physical and psychological traces remains. Artists from Wales increasingly participate in these networks, appearing everywhere, individually and in groups, but it is often a financial strain, an energy sapping experience, and its often a cause of embarrassment that the invitations cannot be reciprocated or that the people we meet can often not see the place we come from represented on the map, literally or figuratively.

It is in the negotiation of these issues that the future depends, not in taking extreme positions, which unfortunately are easily visible on the one side, whilst being invisible on the other since they pass as the 'normal' viewpoint, the view from the centre, and any attempt to move that position to one of understanding and mediation is aggressively resisted more often than not. The drive

towards a monoculture is pervasive and unremitting, and it ignores the fact that there are cultural peripheries present even within the centre.

It is not surprising that debates re surface in a jittery culture like Wales', at once celebrating and questioning recent achievements, new ventures like the *Further* exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2003, or this Artes Mundi Prize. These events are unprecedented in recent years, if ever, in Wales and they herald new opportunities. They bring the wider context of a debate to Wales whilst also firmly placing Wales on a map. With these new opportunities come new responsibilities. We need to understand ourselves well, to know our strengths and weaknesses. And we need to 'write ourselves' up to date. In *Certain Welsh Artists* emphasis is placed on the importance of 'roots', whilst in an essay titled *Wealth of the World* in a later book, *Offerings and Reinventions*, the diverse influences that artists absorb and appropriate into their own work is acknowledged. The collection of essays *here + now* published in 2003 reflect the diversity of artists and their backgrounds and practice in Wales, a fact that added to a growing audience, a gallery network and new initiatives indicates a nascent Wales-art-world. Recent publications such as Hugh Adams' *Imaging Wales* listing forty two artists, Oriel Mostyn's monograph on Reiko Aoyagi or Seren's *Process* on the work of Tim Davies, define that world and make it visible to the widening audience of art readers and students in Wales and beyond. Thanks to the efforts of publishers like Seren, who initiated the process with two books of artists in conversation with poet Tony Curtis, and with essays on contemporary art being published regularly in Planet magazine, there is now no shortage of texts on contemporary art in Wales. This again despite the fact that there is still no dedicated art magazine for Wales.

To return to the opening metaphor, we see the wide undifferentiated surface of a great ocean, below its surface a changing landscape of colour and life. If we float on the surface what do we know of the deep? Risky as it may be, artists need to plumb those depths and dredge up precious information, creating new artefacts that re-connect us with those threads of continuity, some desirable, some not, but an essential project nevertheless. It's for this project that artists are needed, and not for the lesser job of making pleasing ornament or entertaining interventions. Through events like Artes Mundi, Wales' artists can engage with this project. These events have to be more than marketing exercises, they must be tactically relevant, a counter-balance to the oceanic monoculture bias. Wales' artists need to go out into the world knowing that Wales provides for them a receptive and supportive base that can accommodate those ideals and aspirations that they encounter and hold. A base that nurtures young hope and celebrates mature careers, and by that engenders confidence and exchange. An island of fertile ground for planting and reclaiming roots.

The requirements are many - a residential centre for visiting artists, a building to house and exhibit major contemporary art exhibitions, a national collection of contemporary and modern art, a well organised and thought out strategy for major events like the Venice Biennale. Critical mediation and the political will and financial support for pre existing artist led initiatives, and new proposals. Brave, even maverick 'insider' curatorial practice is needed. Some of these requirements are being tentatively addressed and great strides were taken in the last year, but a continuous process of critical appraisal and negotiation must accompany all these developments. Individual practice needs its social dimension and meaning re-emphasised. Artists might reflect on society and its changes, but they also try to fit into that society. When they move around and alight in other parts, do they connect with new societies and inject new perspectives? But in doing so, do they leave their old society to wither? The experiences of the artists in this exhibition may not provide easy answers - but they may help us confront the questions.

The Welsh word for 'society' is 'cymdeithas' ... a word that roughly translates as 'travellers together'. Society, by this definition, is not a done deal, but a voyage we make together. The voyage gets more difficult in this increasingly floating world where there seems to be less and less

solid ground for anchorage. It is in this ocean that maybe, just maybe, artists take on the role of Islands.

## REFERENCES.

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***Welsh Artists Talking*** Tony Curtis (ed). Seren, Bridgend 2000  
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***Offerings and Reinventions*** Iwan Bala. Seren, Bridgend 2000  
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***Imaging Wales.*** Hugh Adams. Seren, Bridgend 2003  
***here+now.*** Iwan Bala. Seren, Bridgend 2003  
***Reiko Ayoaggi.*** Oriel Mostyn 2003. Also in the series James Rielly and Craig Wood.  
***The Colour of Saying, Mary Lloyd Jones.*** Gomer 2002  
***Darllen Delweddau.*** Iwan Bala. Gwasg Carreg Gwalch 2001

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> **Global Visions** ed Jean Fisher Kala Press/InIVA 1994 pp 133

<sup>2</sup> **The Welsh Survival Gene. 'The Despite Culture' in the two Language Communities of Wales'** Jane Aaron. Institute of Welsh Affairs 2003.