

Public Art Wales?

In January 2007 a new Public Art body for Wales commences operations. Named SAFLE, it will be created from the merger of Cywaith Cymru . Artworks Wales (the national organisation for public art in Wales) and CBAT: The Arts and Regeneration Agency and is to be lead by Wiard Sterk, at present Director of CBAT. As is the case with mergers of this kind, differing institutional 'cultures' need to be negotiated, and a strategy developed combining philosophies. At such a time, the debate about Public Art becomes a priority, particularly for a nation in the process of re-defining itself.

At the National Eisteddfod in Swansea in 2006, Cywaith commissioned the artist Rawley Clay to design and build a structure which would be sculptural in it's own right, but would also provide a stage on which performances could take place. This 'brief' was designed to reflect the Eisteddfod itself, for instance reflecting the 'encampment' nature of its itinerant existence; it's various stages for competition and events, its 'constructed' nature. 'Cawell' (Cage/Basket), as it was titled, was the fourth consecutive commission of this kind for the Eisteddfod 'Maes' (Field) and a continuation of over fifteen years of Cywaith activity at the Eisteddfod. Sited directly outside the Lle Celf (Visual Art pavilion) the artStructures are unavoidable presences on the field. 'Cawell' was a particularly elegant and iconic piece, filmed and photographed often during the week. It became the site of large gatherings of onlookers who came to witness the performances of the artist with the poet and language activist, Catrin Dafydd. Together they developed a dramatic and poetic performance that examined the issue of language and culture in relation to Rawley's position within his 'birdcage' structure, and his attempts to learn the language from the inside. Both Catrin and Rawley (a non-Welsh speaker, a native of the Vale of Glamorgan and initiator of Coedhills Rural Artspace, where the emphasis is on environmental issues) found common ground, shared commitments - an instance of two cultures in Wales developing a creative convergence.

For these **artStructure** projects, Cywaith worked in partnership with Academi and with support from Robyn Tomos, Visual Arts officer for the National Eisteddfod. In 2005, writer and singer Gwyneth Glyn worked alongside artists' Helen Jones and Sean Curly on 'Noddfa' (Refuge), a shack and ramp structure that juxtaposed a disintegrating (post tsunami?) environment, with memories of childhood stability. Actor Sharon Morgan staged performances in Carwyn Evans' stacked up shipping containers in 2004, where the narratives of female members of her family complemented a stage made of suitcases and the evidence of flight, migration, and Diasporas. Poets also used it for performing. In 'the Gathering' of 2003, duo's of poets were forced to improvise performances within a sweltering tent structure built by sculptor David Hastie. 'The Gathering' became a theatre, seminar room, prison cell, student bedroom, as daily, different poets endured an hour within its confines. It acted as a metaphor for the bigger 'gathering' outside, of the exhilaration of conversation on the 'maes' but also its claustrophobic

aspects, and perhaps, it's insularity. Like 'Noddfa' it also referenced the wider world, as the poets were aware, chalking 'Guantanamo beirdd' on its wooden rafters. When empty of poets, the Gathering remained a poetic space.

Cywaith also ran an Artist-in-Residence project at the Eisteddfod, which runs for several months leading up to the Eisteddfod where work resulting from it is exhibited. These two initiatives are non-permanent and 'site-specific' – but whilst the residency by its nature involves a large degree of integration with the local community, the **artStructure** commissions allow artists to develop their own work in an interpretation of 'specifics of place' and 'cultural relevance' with singularity of vision.

Richard Nonas, the American minimalist artist said, *'whenever the word art is qualified by an adjective (such as 'Public', 'Community', 'Folk', 'Outsider' or whatever) it is not in fact art that is indicated but something diminished by the usage, which suggests a lesser activity than art. He thinks there is either art or 'not art'.'*ⁱ

Whilst as an artist I am sympathetic to Nonas's sentiment, as a public art Project Manager (with Cywaith), I realize 'Public Art' is the accepted term for art commissioned outside the Gallery, in the public realm, for different purposes and functions. There is art that is simply placed in the public realm, on buildings, in public squares, in parks, and there is art that is public by its very nature, it involves direct interaction with the public, often a set 'community'. This later is a fairly recent development, known in the US as 'new genre public art' or by art theorist Suzi Gablik as 'connective aesthetics'.

But still, this question vexes us – how to precisely define 'public' art - and the artist's responsibility in the public realm? More pertinent, as the new Public Art body takes shape; what is the role of a public art organisation for Wales in particular? Where do its priorities lie? Are they different to those of a public art organisation in Birmingham say? The Arts Council of Wales is keen that the organisation *'should act as a catalyst and innovator to promote and develop the role of artists in the public realm and to improve the quality of the built and natural environment'*. Little mention made of particularities.

The **artStructure** series, which hopefully will continue and take place beyond the Eisteddfod environment, exemplifies the artist-led, site-specific (or site-responsive) project, embedded in the culture, history or geography and architecture of a place or situation. As many of the assumptions of modernist sculpture have been questioned by artists and critics, there has been a movement away from the self contained object, and an interest in establishing the central role of the viewer in the form and content of public sculpture. The 'art object' in some cases is dispensed with entirely, in favour of 'processes', conceptual work and interaction between disciplines. As Wiard Sterk writes in an introduction to CBAT's Urban Legacies 2 conference; *'Art and the skills artists*

*can bring to the built environment are also no longer valued just for their aesthetics*ⁱⁱⁱ That is not to say that without aesthetic merit, (even non-objects are imbued with aesthetic qualities) or with the compromises that come from working in the 'public realm', that the specificity of a work to its location is enough to guarantee success.

There are still instances where a key landmark 'object' is necessary, and it might well be better (though contentious) to purchase a 'ready-made' sculpture and place it, rather than engage with a long, frustrating and debilitating process of 'art by committee'. Sculptural works by the likes of Antony Gormley or Eduardo Chillida – or Richard Serra - signature pieces in effect - have their uses, in particular when they are also site-specific. Witness Chillida's iconic *Peine del Viento* (Combs of the Wind) in San Sebastián in his native Basque country, where it seems to operate as a symbol of Basque character, strength, tenacity and balance. Whilst it would be pointless merely to emulate the Basques, or indeed the astonishingly popular *The Angel of the North*, it is nevertheless quite amazing that there is no large work by David Nash permanently placed anywhere in Wales, his adopted country. In a sense, this could be seen as the function of a 'national collection', viewable outside the Museum.

It's easy to forget in the rarefied atmosphere of art's 'chattering classes', that Public Art has a role in providing monuments and statuary of celebration and remembrance – and, as is often the case in small countries – of reclaiming and emphasising identity. Public art symbolises shared history, as in the monuments to the fallen of the world wars, or of nation building, as the many monuments in Dublin or in Bilbao do for their respective states. Are there any inspiring monuments to Owain Glyndwr in Wales, or do we shrink from such gestures? Perhaps this has something to do with a non-conformist aversion to iconography, or is it due to a lack of confidence? We have, as a safe option perhaps, appropriated Iolo Morganwg's re-invention of the stone circle for Aneurin Bevan's memorial above Tredegar and for Llywelyn at Cilmeri. Sculptor and Landscape artist Richard Harris has invested some verve into this motif recently, with notable success in St David's and in front of The Senedd in Cardiff Bay.

A national public art body has to change preconceptions, and not necessarily by encouraging the adoption of models from elsewhere, but it also has a responsibility to ensure that the 'needs' of the public are met.

Tamara Krikorian, Director of Cywaith Cymru from 1984 to 2005, engaged with these issues with a particular eye on the 'culturally relevant' rather than the short-term dictates of urban developers or a recourse to generic 'art for public spaces'.

Art challenges; artists like Santiago Sierra question art and its institutions, and so should public art, or, more to the point, there should be no border separating art from 'public' art. When considering and commissioning artworks for new buildings, particularly those that aspire to the 'iconic', problems of 'purpose' arise.

Art in its relationship to architecture is often seen as 'ornamentation' to be added at the end of the process. This is possibly why Henry Moore's anthropomorphic and decorative sculptures were always a favourite, they never challenged the building itself. Today however, radical art is as concerned with the disruption of space as it is about harmony. It challenges the urban space, not by monumentalism, but by interaction and intervention. Examples of good practice, where artists can thrive alongside the architect and planner need to be built upon, and new modes of practice initiated where the artists' role might be to create an ambiance, a lighting effect, or an event. Most of Wales however is not urban, so it seems misguided to focus overtly on architecture or the 'built environment'. The amount of new public building in Wales is finite, with the three major public buildings in Cardiff, the Stadium, the Millennium Centre and the Senedd completed as well as new theatre and gallery complexes elsewhere. With diminishing lottery funds it is unlikely that we will see the same level of public expenditure on new build in the coming years. Other ways to bring art to communities all over Wales are required and artist residencies and temporary interventions can provide 'live' contact between the public, the art and the artist, and increasingly allow exploration of pressing environmental issues. The environmental arts charity **nva**ⁱⁱⁱ in Scotland, for example, creates ambitious large-scale, site-specific, temporary and permanent artworks in cities and on mountains and islands.

This subject needs much deeper analysis, and a major role of a public art body has to be that of research, development and critical reflection. It should honestly look at the merits of what is produced as public art in Wales, not blithely replicate trends elsewhere, but adapt and introduce new possibilities relevant to the situation in Wales. Above all, as a major employer of artists in a country where prospects for earning a living are slight, the organisation has to be aware of the needs of artists, and be responsive and responsible to this 'workforce'. An opportunity for occasional work on residencies and commissions means the difference between having artists in Wales, or of seeing them leave.

Ultimately it is a responsibility to keep alive the idea that art is not surrogate to other disciplines and that a work of art may possess extraordinary power, and inspire an impassioned response. To understand the 'aesthetic considerations' of such work, the viewer needs to be drawn into the 'concepts' surrounding it, and the context of it's making. Thus, public art today is far from simple to read – but its importance to a given society depends on its capacity to operate as a symbolic language and through the belief (of artists, commissioners and administrators alike) that it has a significant function as 'Art'.

Iwan Bala. October 2006

- ⁱ **Groundbreaking. The Artist in the Changing Landscape.** (Ed Iwan Bala) Seren/Cywaith Cymru 2005
- ⁱⁱ Wiard Sterk, introduction to 'Another New Babylon' Urban Legacies 2, Cardiff, October 2006
- ⁱⁱⁱ **www.nva.org.uk**