

Re Inventing Reinvention.

A paper given at Gregynnog, March 2nd 2002 to the annual conference of the Association of Welsh Writing in English.

When I first gave a title to this paper, sometime back in the last century, I had no idea how apposite it would be. I had practically completed a paper for this conference, initially scheduled for 2001, but in the intervening year, that paper has vanished without trace from my computer hard drive. For some reason I had no backup copy, and I could find no trace of the handwritten notes I made in preparation for it. This essay is therefore a re invention of my mostly forgotten first invention. Then, lo and behold it was rediscovered and I had to graft parts of the old back into the new. This is quite a preamble, but I believe it illustrates well the nature of re invention, at least it provides me with a good beginning. Seeing that this paper has been scheduled at the very end of a busy day, just before poems and pints, I take it that a heavy academic treatise is not required, which is just as well. I am primarily an artist, therefore an inventor of sorts, in my mind a re inventor even.

The oft quoted words of Gwyn Alf Williams, “Wales has a history of rupture and re invention” or “Wales.... the Welsh make and remake Wales.. if they want to” have become lynch pins for my own thinking about my work since the early 1990’s when I was forced, by the circumstances of an MA course to validate my work in a more theoretical language. I passed over Foucault, Derrida and Lacan to plump for Welsh theorists, taking great succor from Raymond Williams and also Emyr Humphries’ “The Taliesin Tradition”. This was not a display of partisanship, but simply that I found them of more relevance to my own work, and crucially, I found them easier to read. They led me in turn to the writing of Edward Said, Thomas McEvilley, Octavio Paz, Frantz Fanon, Gerardo Mosquera and other writers of postcolonial critique. My thesis was written on the subject of ‘reinvention’ in the guise of ‘shape shifting’. I collaborated on several occasions in the early 90’s with the playwright Ed Thomas, whose mantra was ‘reinvention’. Looking back, I think it was a case of being inventive in a new way as much as re inventing, certainly with “House of America” and “Flowers of the Dead Red Sea”, and the intoxicating excitement of seeing ideas first talked about in the pub, being turned into full blooded reality on stage was a great experience. However, I sometimes wonder whether the term re invention has not already become over used and romantically attached to a zeitgeist. It has certainly become a “key word” in the cultural marketplace, and over use can lead to loss of meaning. Pop stars “reinvent” and politicians “reinvent” themselves. Postmodernism is fueled by reinvention. In much the same way as sex and entertainment has to be reinvented by each generation, is it not the same for nations?

To reinvent something is to replace something that was there before with a more relevant version, (or to use an alternative parlance, a sexier version). This means that the existing thing was itself an invention in the first place (even a reinvention). Icons of identity are such inventions; they are invented at particular times and for particular purposes. In a colonial situation, they are sometimes invented by the indigenous population, (Iolo Morgannwg’s Gorsedd of Bards) but often by the colonizers, or from

the perspective of the ruling hierarchy, (Lady Llanover and the Welsh costume) Reinventing the latter becomes a prerequisite condition of the post colonial period, reinventing the former a function of pragmatic nation building. I leave the discussion on post colonialism and Wales to another paper, but it remains true that Wales is undergoing a change in its aspirations and view of itself in the world and this has led to a process of re invention that can be examined through the prism of the visual art of Wales.

Since the 1980's, the theme of identity has become a hot issue for art theory and practice. Identity is another key word in critical theory and debate, a word frequently used quite critically and without much debate. Whilst for our near neighbors the issue of Welsh identity still proves problematic, it is also problematic within Wales itself, and it is here that some assumptions are being made about the nature of the proposal in the book "Certain Welsh Artists"¹ which I compiled in 1999. Reinvention is a post colonial strategy that I have witnessed in the new art from Zimbabwe, Cuba, Ireland and elsewhere, but also in the art of feminism, black art, gay art and so on. Such communities needed to reinvent themselves for the first time as independent, free national group identities in a global context. This is often tied up with a rejection of some of Modernism's prevailing attitudes, which in this case has been seen to be the received orthodoxy of imperialism. Western, hegemonic, utopian universalism imposed by the male hierarchies of the dominant powers. "Certain Welsh Artists" is a book that is necessary in Wales in that it deals with these issues as they manifest themselves in Wales.

The process of the recent reinvention, of re imaging Wales in visual art, begins with the work of Paul Davies and the Beca group in the 1970's and 80's. Beca's importance is still largely unrecognized. It was the instigating force in the politicization of Welsh art, and one that focused international trends and methodologies into a language that highlighted specific concerns in Wales. Beca artists' drew from sources as diverse as Arte Povera, Fluxus and, particularly in the case of Ivor Davies, Surrealism, the Paris avant-garde and "Destruction in Art". Beca made collaborative pieces and events as well as individual works that dealt with such issues as Tryweryn, a modern site of national, collective memory and trauma, loss of language, holiday homes, as well as re inventing, or appropriating elements like the love spoon and the map of Wales for the purposes of a commentary of protest. There were embryonic attempts at a sort of agit prop art, mail art was made, pieces of art being posted back and forth between members to be added to individually, the artwork thus collected a history as it traveled.

A recent manifestation of this kind of work, but drawing its methods from new directions, is Tim Davies' installation floor piece of 1997, "Capel Celyn" utilized a single five-inch nail found in the dried up reservoir, replicating it 5,000 times in wax and laying a ghostly carpet on the gallery floor. Mute, ghostly, a reminder of the silence of the lake, the silence of a community and perhaps, nails in the coffin of Wales' core identity.

Many artists in Wales have taken up that particular burden of carrying a dissenting voice that is nonetheless "true" to present day Wales. David Garner for example, with

¹ Certain Welsh Artists. Custodial Aesthetics in Contemporary Welsh Art. Ed Iwan Bala. Seren 1999.

his vast tarpaulin like canvases and installations chronicling the decimation of heavy industry and traditional ways of life in the mining communities of south Wales. These are not the heroic or romantic views of miners seen in the canvasses of Joseph Herman or Valerie Ganz, though there is a heroic element to the work. Collectors looking for Welsh art at Sotheby's and Phillips auctions might disagree, but depictions of miners have been relegated to the "Wales as was" department, along with the Welsh tea party and soon enough, flat capped farmers with sheep dogs.

The need for reinvention is always there. The tradition of landscape painting, the most identifiable visual art form from and about Wales in the minds of the majority of the population, like male voice choirs, is pleasing, reassuring and very marketable, but needs constant reinventing if it is to have any worth as art, not commodity. The paintings of Kyffin Williams are undoubtedly the equivalents of male voice choirs; they are iconic and accepted as such in Wales and outside, but as landscape paintings, as art, they have been stuck in the same groove since 1950.

Peter Prendergast and David Tress are engaged in the painterly reinvention of the tradition, making up new words for the old visual language. Catrin Webster, Brendan Burns, Geoffrey Olsen, are all painters who take a new angle on the Welsh topography as does Mary Lloyd Jones who chronicles today's landscape as a palimpsest of half forgotten yesterdays, buried sometimes deep and sometimes close to the surface. Incorporating poetry, she invests her paintings with that essence of "deep memory" that only poetry passes down to us. Kevin Sinnot and Shani Rhys James invent new interpretations to the figure within that landscape. Osi Rhys Osmond paints the landscape of Wales in the light of industrial decline and the grassing over of memories, a state of "cultural Alzheimer's" as he calls it. A similar condition is lamented in a recent work by the younger Angharad Jones, a blacksmith artist who here gilds her own anvil thus making it beautiful but useless as a tool. Her installation incorporating the anvil presents it as an ornament to heritage, all that remains of the heavy industry culture of Wales.

The photographs of Peter Finne more, from his familial garden of Gwendraeth house in Pontiets near Llanelli, reinvent the typical Welsh family as a quixotic and vaguely exotic phenomenon. He comments ironically on Welsh history as it was taught in "Lesson 56 Wales" (1998), presenting photographs of his grandmother's school history textbook. I quote "When speaking of England it is understood that **Wales** is also meant" bringing to mind the famous Oxford Dictionary statement, "for Wales, see England". Lois Williams is an artist who makes her work out of the detritus of the farming way of life, through the methods of traditional women's work, a piece like "The Simplest Aid to looking at Wales" resembles the learning blocks of an alphabet, a Welsh language alphabet.

We are faced with what appears to be diametrically opposing tendencies in art. The first is the postcolonial, site specific, culturally specific art that I have called "custodial aesthetics". This, I suggest is art that carries with it a memory or an idea of a specific culture and its place in the world, and that whilst its specificity does not limit its appeal, it sits in opposition to the art that moves towards a "new internationalism" by being stylistically homogenized and devoid of content. Metropolitan theorists, as they

invariably are, are quick to point out that “Identities” like religions, are fabricated, invented and imagined to give us comfort and solace. In a world that appears to be fragmenting, “the centre cannot hold” to paraphrase Yeats, it feels good to be part of a gang, “our gang”. Naming your gang, your imagined community is important because we perceive the act of naming to be akin to understanding and being in control. By naming it we fix it. We extol a fabricated cultural homogeneity because we fear the tower of Babel that the world has become.

I have presented here only a selective view of contemporary art in Wales. For a truly reinvented Wales, we have to make sure that we are not imposing our own “selective history” in Raymond Williams' words, to our detriment. Wales is not one narrative. Can we make the new national story that we tell as inclusive as is possible?

The mantra “reinvent, reinvent” sometimes sounds desperate, particularly in the context of a concept such as “Wales”, but, like postmodernism, it is not something we choose, but something we live within. It is of this time. In as much as the essentialist credo of modernism's, its belief in the primacy of form over content has become increasingly discredited, so outmoded visions of Wales need reinventing, and the role of the visual artist is clear in this process. Transitional times need recording and new images need to assert themselves. The greatest reinvention in Wales' visual arts is the very fact that many more Welsh men and women are making art, and that many more artists of all nationalities are choosing Wales as a base to work from. This means that artists are able to stay in Wales to work in away that was never possible before, and that they do not feel themselves to be provincial when they do so. What is required is for our institutions and curators to have a similar self-confidence, so that this reinvention becomes a visible phenomenon, so that art in and from Wales can be promoted.

In a paper given at a conference by the Institute of International Visual Arts called “Global Visions”, Gilane Tawadros dismantles the construct of cultural homogeneity but concedes that; *“the forces of nationalism and internationalism have been powerful catalysts of change and regeneration in our past century, but only when they grow out of present realities and not abstract concepts floating somewhere high up in the stratosphere, far removed from lived experience”*². The work of artists in Wales today proves that Wales' present realities can still be harnessed for change and regeneration, or to come back to the title of the paper, reinvention.

²“*The Case of the Missing Body, a Cultural Mystery in Several Parts*”, Gilane Tawadros.

²“Global Visions. Towards a New Internationalism in Visual Arts” Kala Press, London, 1994.