

FLOURISH

- Anthony Shapland

Flourish. To Flourish. A Flourish. To thrive and prosper or to gesture in an elaborate fashion. The exhibition is a collection of these gestures. The artists offer us new ways of looking, possibly the most important role for the artist in society. Often they are ridiculed; their gestures are seen as 'emperor's new clothes', only understood by those foolish enough to believe. Artists can often be seen as fops, the privileged few talking to the unsophisticated masses, the dandies with the upper hand. In the shifting contemporary art scene there is one thing that is constant: the gestures of artists, the posturing flourish that is contemporary work in a world that believes it could continue without it.

But these stands against the accepted order of things can offer a new clarity to situations, a glimmer of hope that lights the path to a place where things may not be better but they certainly can be different. Sometimes logical thought gets in the way. It breeds a complacency that shouldn't exist in a world as fractured as ours; the binary logic of either/or depends on accepting proven knowledge. But when logic is out of the window nonsense reigns and makes a new kind of sense. A gesture is made against the way things are; B no longer follows A and the perpetrators are not anarchists but artists. Sometimes this makes viewers of contemporary art unsettled, hostile and unwilling to take any step that admits that, in this shaky world, absolutes are there to be doubted.

The artists in the show do not offer us an unmediated view of the world. They step in, mess things up a little, and step out. Their presence in the bigger scheme is conferred importance by the changes that they make to the things around them. It is not pointless, posturing or kind: it is fundamental and necessary, born out of curiosity and acts as a catalyst for change.

When these gestures happen in an unforgiving, harsh landscape, the follies of producing art stand in stark relief. Visual art has sometimes been perceived as an

unnecessary flourish when it is contrasted with the toil and struggle of a nation, when it is pitted against unemployment or a lack of hospital beds. But it is these stands against the accepted order of things, often against logic, that vocalise some of the most potent, most interesting and necessary ideas of progress. A small nation like Wales, under threat from greater powers, has a tendency to play it safe. The suspicion of the New is ever-present but the tension that exists between the pull back of tradition and the pull forward of the future is an essential factor for its contemporary artists.

But an argument can be made that these kicks against the status quo have long had a hold in Wales. There seems to be a tradition of protest and groups or individuals that take the apparently impossible as a challenge, some of them more serious in nature, leading to fundamental changes. In the 1800s the 'Rebecca Riots' protested against the imposed toll charges on the roads in Wales. To find a way around the danger of being recognised during these attacks - which were then a hanging offence - farmers carried them out disguised in their wives' clothes. A ridiculous but necessary strategy used to combat an unjust law.

A century later there is another marker of a distinct eccentric tendency for revolution in Wales. Over a 50-year period from the 1920s the architect Clough Williams Ellis decided that he would turn a desolate corner of Wales into the most beautiful Italianate town and created Portmeirion. This was not the totemic folly of a rich man with too much cash, this was a passion. He scaled down his favourite buildings from Europe and built replicas in a craggy spot in Wales. Why? He wanted to prove that there was more than one thing that could exist there, more than one way. The spot has been transformed forever, used in the 70s TV series 'The Prisoner' and now peopled by a mix of nerds and architecture lovers.

Equalling the conviction of Portmeirion's stand against the harsh climate was a group called *Club Artistic de Coiffeurs*,* a society of Welsh hair stylists and salon owners who formed circa 1968. Their aim was to create

*Anthony Brockway, *Notes from the Margins of Welsh Popular Culture*, 2003.

new hairstyles suitable for the women of Wales but which would also be adopted across Europe. These hairdressing visionaries believed they were faced with one fundamental challenge – the Welsh weather. Our adverse climate of blustery winds, salty sea air and incessant rain wreaked havoc with your average Welsh head. In the autumn of 1968 they came up with an answer to this problem and christened it *The Cariad*. It was low at the front, with ringlets or kiss curls cascading down the sides. The low crown was brushed to give extra elevation. This, believed the eight founder members of *Club Artistic de Coiffeurs*, would combat the severest of weather conditions. It was billed as ‘the first ever Welsh hairstyle’.

There are these pockets of odd genius, people employing the unlikely to combat the day-to-day all over Wales. They transform those places that are seen as the middle of nowhere into somewhere. Often when I hear of American follies, like the biggest rubber band ball in the world, or a giant frying pan I can picture them by the side of the road on the way to Newport or round the corner at Betws. On the hillside as you leave the Rhondda there are weird looking sculptures littering the hillside. They are the pursuit of one man who has been producing papier-mâché dinosaurs and placing them there for years. They litter the majestic gateway into this, the biggest valley of South Wales, with their grinning poster paint smiles.

A folly is often seen as the whim of folk with more money than sense. A case of deciding that if something can be done, irrespective of use or affordability, then it should be done. The artists in this show point out that attempting the impossible or even the improbable can be taken by us all as a strategy of upsetting the status quo. The logic that says it should be ‘this’, not ‘that’, is foisted on those perceived to have little choice in the matter, because of a lack of money, as if will and free will (and therefore folly) is something only available to those with the time and cash to indulge it. Folly is a proletariat pursuit, or it should be. Do nothing or do something; fail because you tried or fail because you did nothing. Embracing failure might be one way of putting it. Shame-faced embarrassment at the patheticness of it all can be transformed; why fail at the little things when you

can attempt to do the bigger ones? Try alchemy instead of DIY.

Throughout Europe the continual fracture and displacement of people is a historical fact, and the question of national identity is an incredibly complex one to deal with. Equally complex are the responses and works of artists that choose either to embrace the issue or distance themselves from it. The position of nomad seems to be a desirable one for the contemporary artist whose idea of national identity is foregrounded or downplayed according to the exigencies of the moment. But perhaps uniquely in Wales it is the external perception of it being in the margins, part of the parochial regions or on the peripheries that has led to a greater preponderance with notions of identity - an identity crisis that ultimately may lend it greater confidence in the contemporary world. Wales is now an interesting hybrid nation with external influences being subsumed into the culture of Wales rather than the culture of Wales feeling under threat. We unite under the flag, decrying some of the preconceptions while reinforcing others, and being proud of them; it is surely a sign of confidence when prejudices become part of your armour.

In a show such as this where one geographical common thread already exists I hesitate to add others, the artists in the show all work in different ways. What there is in common is a desire for change. *Do the little things*, one of the works is called, implying that the big things follow. The work is activist in its attempts to change things, some of the artists intervening like Robin Hoods or pirates. Other works echo with the '... because it was there' folly of explorers. Elsewhere, artists attempt to transform the base into the magnificent, adding flourishes to an everyday world. From the margins you can often just look towards the centre but it is from here, on the periphery that you get a clearer view of the other places on the periphery. This is also true of logic. The further you are from the anchor of established fact, the closer you come to the mire of possibilities.

GROUP PORTRAIT OF ARTISTS AS FLOURISH

- Marek Pokorný

A major encounter between Welsh and Czech cultures occurred over half a century ago in the environs of Old Prague. In local pubs, accompanied by the poet Vladimír Holan or by the translator and poet Jiřina Hauková, Dylan Thomas, 'with a gesture characteristic of beer-lovers tersely ordered <A big one>,' in the words of Josef Škvorecký.

Dylan Thomas, probably the most famous and, in his time, also the most frequently read Welsh writer, was born in Swansea, a small port the existence of which (if acknowledged at all) the Czech public now associates with the Hollywood star Catherine Zeta-Jones, a Swansea native and a long-term member of the local theatre company, rather than with the author of almost a hundred brilliant poems, a radio play and a large number of short stories. Thomas's visit to Prague, which passed into local legend, swept on by his readers and his works as late as the 1980s, has one special political aspect. In his poem *The hand that signed the paper* from the late 1930s, Thomas responded to the Munich Agreement in a manner that was not merely an expression of slight engagement on principle, but rather reflected a profound compassion and shock that had impacted upon a concrete, extraordinarily perceptive and sensitive person. (The only verses comparable with Thomas's in terms of intensity were those in *Bohemia Lies by the Sea*, a poem by the Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann, who transformed the shock of the 1968 Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia into a timeless statement.)

During Thomas's pilgrimage through the Prague night and its pubs, with poets forced into strict privacy, perhaps the most important thing appeared to be - in a country separated from the rest of Europe by the Iron Curtain - an exclusive opportunity to realise that the most perceptive on both sides of a divided world can say the same: '(I write) But for the lovers, their arms/Round the griefs of the ages,/Who pay no praise or wages/Nor heed my craft or art.' Although the news of a film star driving around Swansea in her parents' old Skoda car does not lack for

a certain degree of charm, it is chiefly testimony to the fact that times and sensitivities change. If we present contemporary art from Wales now, we should forget neither these important moments from the past nor the ephemeral but characteristic encounters of the present, despite the fact that they have the nature of almost invisible touches. I don't want to compare literature and art, nor the world fifty years ago and the problems of today. Yet a context constitutes a network of geopolitical relations and artistic strategies as topical as a memory, a random piece of information and spontaneous humour. After all, in the Czech Republic we subconsciously particularly associate Wales with its original Celtic settlement, and only a few know more about the long and painful struggle for the right to use the original Welsh language freely (comparison with the Czech Enlightenment lacks about a hundred years and a measure of brutality, as in the Czech lands the issue was politics and culture, while in Wales it was genuine survival).

Contemporary Wales exhibits the same or fairly similar interests, population behaviour and problems as the majority of West-European countries and regions. Economic development, unemployment, agriculture, social programmes, tourism, conversions and revitalisation of deserted industrial complexes (the Cardiff docks) and their incorporation into newly-defined municipal structures in Wales are of the same character as in Scotland, Brittany or Moravia. Artists from Wales act in a way analogous to that of their colleagues anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, the situation on the Welsh art scene is, in some aspects, very similar to ours. Wales as a part of Europe is, both geographically and culturally, an area that could be termed semi-peripheral. Like Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Croatia and Portugal, it is a space - country, region - to which major centres only devote their attention in moments of radical change, or more so, when disaster strikes. And even then it is only a matter of a brief burst of excitement (to say 'wave' would be an exaggeration) or fashion. In consequence, the protagonists of local politics and culture must be all the more active compared with other countries. However, and this is perhaps even more important for us, they have a chance to find understanding and response in places sharing a similar fate. That is, if we act naturally

towards those in comparable conditions, with a genuine interest and concern, and above all without prejudice and any remarkably counterproductive obsession with competition, in which we ostensibly find ourselves in relation to the richer, the more famous and the stronger.

What should interest us in the work of young Welsh artists is their openness towards the world, their confidence and the sense of the reflection of their own cultural-historical and cultural-political background. On the other hand, we certainly should not expect them to put what we might so nostalgically long for into every piece of work. It is not folklore or ethnography, nor is it political art. Some time ago, I was deeply impressed by a Cerith Wyn Evans project, in which the main part was played by a verse from a canonical Welsh epic transcribed into the Morse alphabet and transformed into a light signal beamed towards the sky with a laser, or mediated to the visitor through some other light source. The work is based on a double cipher, for how many people know both the Morse code and the Welsh language? Its theme is the remoteness, incomprehensibility as well as accessibility, the distance between the past and present, the difference between what is natural (a mother tongue) and what man has created artificially. Although Evans himself is represented by another work at the exhibition, the show is based on similar paradoxes.

Let us go back to the past once again. It was in one of the spa towns on the north coast of Wales that Lewis Carroll, a mathematician, writer and amateur photographer started to write *Alice in Wonderland*. The book's poetic world, created through the use of precise rules of logics and mathematics, provides, in a certain respect, a metaphor for current artistic practice. Artists choose various layers of reality and various game rules, combining them in order to manifest their affinity, or their absurdity, to unveil their manipulative potential, or to use them all to build up a new space and fill it with meaning. In my opinion, the FLOURISH exhibition as a whole is rooted in two basic principles. First, it represents either a clearly pronounced, or at least subliminally present, bond between the artists and the Welsh countryside (in Cushway's work *Snowdon* a part of the landscape is even physically present), and between

the country's unsettled history, including its mythological resonance. Second, it contains the attributes of global civilisation on the threshold of the 21st century, such as pop culture, information technologies and migration - factors from which the spine and atmosphere of everyday life in Cardiff and Brno stem. The result is an exhibition as a temporary world in which both layers merge and elucidate one another. In a sense, contemporary Welsh art has our standards and is close to us through its experience. What we can envy its exponents is the ability and willingness not to deny but productively employ the 'old sources', the obsession and endeavour to understand one another along an extended chronological horizon, without having to abandon purely up-to-date means of expression.

All previous exhibitions of contemporary British art have generally concentrated on the London scene, namely on artists involved with the YBA (Young British Artists) phenomenon. The purpose of the FLOURISH - Art from Wales exhibition is to view the situation beyond the English Channel from a completely different perspective. Our objective was to adjust the axis of view and introduce art originating outside centres, in specific social and cultural conditions. For me personally, this project is in many respects revealing and adventurous.

Contrary to Dylan Thomas's passionately melancholic vision, our show is deliberately 'optimistic' from its very title. The October Wind will surely return, but right now Wales is a flourish for contemporary art, a place of blossoming, of critical confidence in its importance and potential. Naturally, it comprises a precise dose of humour, irony and detachment, but also a sense of the poetic quality of the world that brings us close to Wales and its artists.

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National Pride

2002, looped digital video,
variable dimensions
(image by the artist)

27a

Wringing

2005, looped digital video,
variable dimensions
(image by the artist)

27b

Scratching

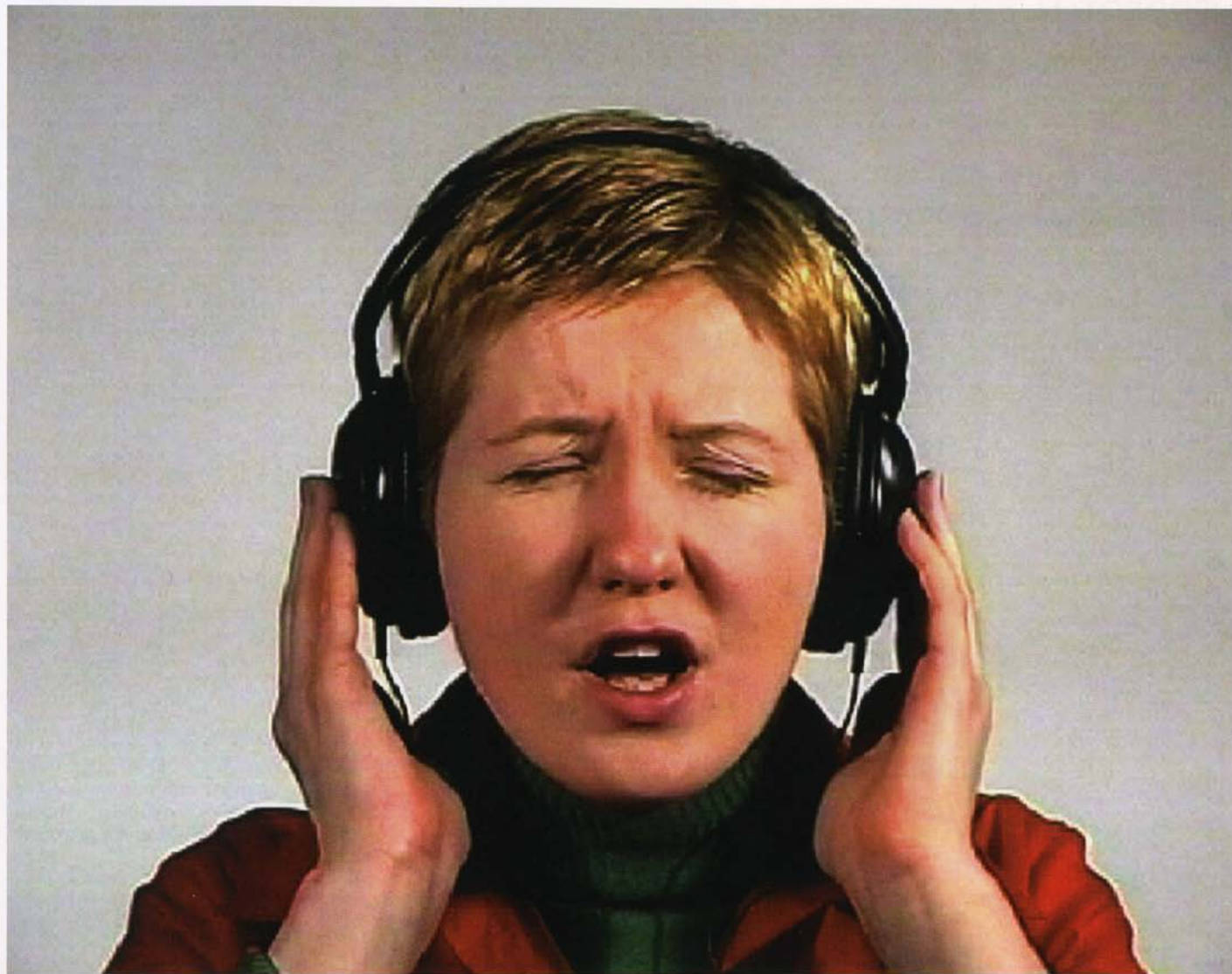
2005, looped video
projection, variable
dimensions
(image by the artist)

Olwen Returns (2005): The idea for this work began when I read about *The Wind*, a silent 35 mm film by Seastrom (1928). Originally I intended to re-make this using myself as the actress. This developed into a broader investigation of how human emotions are depicted through forces of nature in literature (e.g. *Wuthering Heights* by Bronte, 1847) and film (e.g. *Rebecca* by Hitchcock, 1940). *Olwen Returns* attempts to make reference to 'big themes' from art history—the landscape, romanticism, beauty. It is concerned with the value of human emotion: my practice has always tried to create an immediate psychological impact on the audience and is not just concerned with an intellectual enquiry. I am also interested in how a female's actions are often interpreted as being controlled by her emotions or biology, rather than by logic.

Olwen Returns was shot on 16 mm black & white film, before transfer to digital video. It is shown as a continuous loop with no definite start or end, encouraging the viewer to create and change their own narrative. There is no concrete story, instead the piece offers up endless 'clues' and reference points. For instance, the name in the title translates from Welsh as 'Blessed Footprints' and it is also a heroine from the Welsh legend *The Mabinogion*. The locations in the film were chosen because of their over-familiarity, we are already very aware of several of the sites through their use in small and large screen film productions—most recently in *Pride and Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005). In addition they are sites with personal relevance; I was born and brought up in Wales and I currently live close to the Peak District.

Last year I made *Ssh!* originally shot on super-8 film, to be screened in cinemas. This was heavily influenced by *The Spiral Staircase* (Siodmak, 1945) and Samuel Beckett's 35 mm *Film*. However, producing a piece for a single screen is a relatively new direction in my work. During the past ten years I have predominantly created time-based installations in response to derelict buildings or the gallery environment. My practice is context-specific; it considers the nature of the site where the work will be experienced in terms of its use, physicality or history. Previous works have centred upon human relationships and flawed attempts to communicate. I have explored notions of 'the self' through the use of repetitive gestures and speech.

I still continue to make complex multiple video and audio installations, most recently *The space is empty and waiting* (2005). In this I investigate my identity as an artist and the difficulties of the artistic process, through the recording and playback of parts of my body performing nervous actions. The visitor experiences the situation of the artist trying to make art alone in their studio: the tension, stress and frustration are palpable. I am perhaps trying to articulate the sense of panic that can accompany the creative process and more broadly what anyone faces at times: the fear of failure.





Two hands clasped together, symbolizing support and strength.



A close-up view of hands clasped together, emphasizing the texture and detail of the grip.