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Art, Wales, Discourse and Devolution

William Housley

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study carried out on art and devolution in Wales. It explores practitioners' understandings of visual art in Wales and the notion of Welsh art as national parameters that are both recognised and contested. The paper analyses examples of artistic narrative as a means of describing the character of these understandings and the various discourses utilised by artists in negotiating the relationship between the creative self and wider social, cultural and national boundaries. The paper argues that recent developments in Wales and the attempts to construct a national visual story overlook the sociological reality of contestation and alternate understandings circulating within the art scene in Wales. However, it also acknowledges that homogenised fictions are inevitable features of national social/cultural forms that have been marginalised. To this extent the paper explores the narrative of the creative self in relation to wider discourses of nation in terms of a case study that has resonance with the study of culture, marginalised collective experience and national renewal and re-invigoration and cultural modernization in Wales, the UK and beyond.

Key Words: Art, Wales, Narrative, Culture, Identity, Devolution, Voice

Wales is a small country that is recognised as a distinct constituent nation of the United Kingdom. It is characterised by a number of differences that include the existence of the Welsh language, unique national institutions (e.g. the Welsh Language Television Channel[s] S4C, the University of Wales, National Museum and Gallery and specific national cultural events). In 1997, the electorate of Wales voted in favour of the establishment of a devolved National Assembly. This Assembly has specific 'devolved' powers that include the areas of health, education and culture. As stated previously, Wales is recognised as possessing a distinct culture within the fabric of the British Isles and Europe. It is popularly associated with the 'Celtic nations' of Europe and has certain cultural characteristics that stand in contrast to its larger and more powerful neighbour. Whilst this is clearly the case with respect to Cymraeg (the Welsh language) the case for other cultural practices has not always been so clear-cut. The case of the visual arts is a good example.

During the course of this paper I intend to explore some issues relating to the visual arts and wider changes within the national context of Wales. The paper draws from a study on art and devolution in Wales that explored the perceptions and expectations of a number of established artists working within Wales. The study explored the relationship between art and Wales through a detailed analysis of accounts generated through in-depth interviews. Whilst this paper, in line with the study¹, represents an exploratory analysis, it aims to identify important themes, issues and perspectives that constitute this relatively unexplored domain of sociological interest.

Whilst the focus of this research was directed towards the context of Wales it has resonance with other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe. At a general level the project was concerned with documenting artists' expectations and perceptions of devolution in Wales in relation to the organisation of the visual arts, funding, cultural identity and representation. More specifically, the research aimed to explore artists' (and

people engaged in the production, management and exhibition of artistic products) expectations and perceptions of devolution and change within the United Kingdom. The contributions, concerns and insights of the artistic community are often ignored during times of social and political change whilst the products of art are, paradoxically, used as a means of interpreting historical events. This research sought to identify the changes that members of the artistic community expect to take place within the artistic community itself, the changing relationship and profile of the Arts with Welsh institutions and the general public and policy formation within the new devolved Assembly. The study also sought to identify and profile the artistic communities perception of devolution as an opportunity for Art to take a greater role in Welsh life and raise it's profile as an important area of social, cultural and economic activity.

Wales and National Identity

Theoretical and empirical work in the area of national identity and Wales has developed in recent years. Nationalism in Wales has been explored as a social construction (Denney, Borland and Fevre, 1991) work by Fevre et al (1997, 1999) has developed the exploration of nationalist groups and organisations and has understood some of their activities in terms of the protection of monopolies in social and economic resources. Further work on national identity in Wales has explored the relationship between configurations of identity and the challenge of 'inclusive politics' within new devolved political frameworks (Chaney and Fevre, 2001). More recent work has explored the construction and negotiation of Welsh national identity within primary schooling and childhood (Scourfield, Davies and Holland, 2003). This work seeks to relate notions of national identity in relation to an emerging devolved civic sphere in Wales. Additional sociological work has explored the more mundane aspects of nationalism (Billig 1995)

and its interactional and situated characteristics in relation to Wales and identity (Housley and Fitzgerald 2001).

Despite the plethora of sociological work on national identity in post-devolution Wales little focus has been directed towards the cultural sphere and its relationship between different forms of identity construction and representation. A notable exception to this point is Dicks' work on heritage, territoriality and imagined communities (1999,1997,1996). Through a 'museographical case study' of the Rhondda Heritage Park Dicks work demonstrates how specific forms of representation of community and the Rhondda, in which marginality and peripheral [Welsh working class] experiences are paramount, is colonised through specific territorial discourses of 'Britishness' and 'Rhondda Valleyiness'. In many respects this paper builds on the work above by exploring notions of Welsh cultural identity through a consideration of the visual arts. More specifically through a reconsideration of the representations and understandings of the visual arts in Wales as understood by prominent art practitioners; in other words a concern with the actual producers and creators of artefacts. The cultural *producers* whose creative activity, whilst appropriated, is not translated into the recognition of a legitimate artistic voice and source of knowledge and insight concerning a changing cultural identity within the space and place that they live, work and create.

Wales, Devolution and Art

In recent years art in Wales has sustained its position as a contested domain and form of life characterised by controversy. The recent collapse of the Cardiff Centre for the visual Arts, the ripping of the plans for the building of an Opera House in Cardiff Bay and various debates on 'cultural policy' in the newly established National Assembly have added to an air of debate, interest, frustration and, in some cases, anger. In terms of the visual arts, however, events surrounding venues and funding have not prevented

something of a resurgence in the profile of the visual arts in Wales. In some cases this has taken on a direct and explicit connection with attempts to kick start a wider cultural renaissance within post-devolution Wales. This move has, more often than not, provided a further space through which the contested and slippery concept of the Welsh nation can be imagined, realised, explored and represented. The relationship between devolution and the visual arts is perhaps one that is abstract. However, as an important dimension of the cultural apparatus and array of practices routinely appropriated by the discourse of culture, it has increasingly been subject to the gaze of the new devolved institutions of Wales and active intellectual commentary. In terms of devolved institutions in Wales, the culture committee of the Welsh Assembly has recognised the importance of the visual arts in relation to cultural policy in Wales. In a discussion paper (Post – 16 Education and Training Committee – ETR 15.00, 28/6/2000) the former cultural committee arts and cultural advisor locates the visual arts within a wider discourse of Welsh culture. The discussion paper states:

The culture of Wales is rich and deep in its diversity of expression. It is a performative culture where people are passionate to take part and enjoy others taking part – from sports to choirs to acting to brass bands to Eisteddfodau, mountaineering, films, water sports and rock concerts. It admires the skills of creativity, hard work, industry and innovation. It is hewn from the natural environment of Wales, its dramatic landscape, its education system and unique social and industrial history. Wales excels in the literary arts, in its visual culture, in its music making, its built heritage, its national institutions, its actors and its sporting achievements... Wales is defined by its ancient language, its modern diversity of peoples and its social compassion, but above all, by its passion for creativity. The Culture of Wales is in the process of re-shaping itself, of re-defining itself, perhaps even, of re-inventing itself for the challenging of the new century and in reaction of the new political situation in which it finds itself.

In terms of active intellectual scholarship and commentary Peter Lords *Imaging the Nation* (2000) represents a profound move towards both the *establishment* and *recovery* of a visual narrative for Wales. With reference to the history of the visual arts in Wales and the process of the collective recovery of a national visual narrative Lord (2002:9) states:

It has often been alleged that a national consciousness heavily conditioned by the needs of differentiation from a dominant neighbour is a characteristic Welsh weakness. As a result of the political and economic decline of that neighbour, a complementary growth in our own self-confidence, and a wider change in perceptions of nationality, it is the hope of many at the beginning of the twenty-first century that this essentially colonized state of mind may at last be transcended.

For Lord, the sensible recovery of a 'Welsh' visual heritage is part of such a process. This process is also occurring during a time of significant cultural, political, social and economic change in Wales epitomised by the devolution process and attempts at the re-generation of both physical and mental landscapes.

Consequently, the visual arts, as part of a wider array of cultural practices in Wales, can also be seen to be a concern of the devolution process and the potential re-invigoration of region and 'nation'. This process has also been bolstered by Cardiff's bid for the European Capital of Culture in 2008 through which the interface between cultural concerns and economics has increasingly come into focus. Furthermore, in 2003 Wales was represented at the Venice Biennale. This represents a profound shift in cultural representation and identity at the level of the visual arts within a high profile international context. This event courted some controversy concerning the Welsh credentials of the artists chosen to represent Wales at the event (Western Mail, 12/6/03). A central dimension of this debate was the connection of being born in Wales, living in Wales and the production of visual artefacts. This paper deals with some of the issues that lie behind this particular debate and the wider discursive field in and through which it is articulated and understood. However, before exploring these issues some consideration of the methodological and analytical approach adopted in this paper will be provided.

The analytical and methodological approach of this paper

Whilst the policy context and general profile of the visual arts and culture is of importance this paper seeks to explore the field of the visual arts in Wales in terms of a detailed analysis of prominent Artists working and living in Wales. The method for selecting the artists interviewed involved the use of publicly available information provided by established institutions in Wales (e.g. the Royal Cambrian Society for the Visual Arts) and contacting well known and established Artists living and working in Wales. Over twenty-two in-depth interviews with elite artist practitioners was undertaken. To this extent the paper draws from data gathered from figures established within the art world. This clearly confines the validity of any observations in terms of the generalisability of artistic perceptions and understandings to a type of 'core group' (Collins 2002). However, they do represent a systematic analysis of narratives provided by members of a recognisable 'group'. Consequently, this paper works with a series of exemplars grounded in a number of case-centred studies of prominent artistic practitioners. Thus, the examples of artistic world-view in post-devolution Wales presented in this paper are representative of a systematic analysis of the general data which yielded three principle art world view types. This work provides detailed enquiry into this under researched form of life, practice and social perception and perspective within a peripheral European setting. It does so by examining the discourses and understandings of practitioners and thereby initiates the mapping out of an unexplored set of discursive constructions. The relationship between cultural activity and peripheral economic location is one that demands examination. However, whilst this is a latent theme of this paper it is one that is not taken up, this deserves far more detailed attention and serves as a basis for ongoing and future research. This paper examines artists' accounts and narrative in relation to identity and the social, cultural and political parameters of a peripheral, submerged and problematic national experience.

The notion of narrative used here is one that is couched within the analytical framework of narrative analysis Gubrium (1993), Plummer (1995) and the notion of accounts and categorisation articulated within the work of Harvey Sacks (1992). This paper therefore understands artists as knowledgeable agents whose accounts of art world-views form critical resources for understanding art worlds and practices. They also represent a crucial means through which the creative self is displayed. The focus here is on the discursive representations and understandings displayed in the artists narrative rather than the social organisation of talk-in-interaction.

The analysis of these accounts will initially take the form of exploring their topical organisation, content and the display of *art world perspectives* in relation to the context of national parameters, identity and political processes. This paper seeks to explore the perceptions and expectations of visual artistic practitioners in relation to these matters through the analysis of these narratives. To this extent the paper follows Maines' (2002:220) observation that:

Narrative structures can be thought of as kinds of information technologies insofar as they are a mechanism for processing information... Unlike those formed of wire, computer chips, or paper, however, narrative structures are formed by history. They begin with humans trying to make sense out of problematic situations and emerge years later as forms of meaning that contain the criteria for evaluating the credibility of information. They possess reified truth claims and taken-for-granted properties of what-everybody-knows. Like public opinion... narrative structures are tied to a society's social structure, and thus their agency derives in part from the legitimising processes that inhere in societal institutional arrangements.

The analysis of Artistic narrative in Wales has been explored from a more literary, as opposed to sociological, perspective in the form of Tony Curtis's *Welsh Artists Talking* (2000). In many respects the narratives produced in this book have much affinity with some of the analysis and discussion presented in this paper. However, I intend to explore these narratives from a more sociological angle. In terms of the genesis of this project it

was my intention to explore art in terms of *artists* expectations and perceptions. This approach is one that is shared and consistent with Curtis's straightforward and unambiguous approach. Furthermore, the concern with the narrative and voices of artists connects with important sociological work on the collective character of telling as a site through which wider representations, concerns and understandings of particular social groups can be grasped.

Narrative and the contested reality of Welsh Art

In terms of self, creativity and identity and national forms of categorisation it would be tempting to establish a matrix of types; upon which various quantified descriptive instances could be mapped, in order to establish a quantified portrait of national self-categorisation and its' relation to creativity and artistic practice. However, in terms of the corpus of interviews of an artistic 'elite group' such a manoeuvre achieves little. Rather the narrative forms of understandings and descriptions will be attended to in order to flesh out and render visible the understandings and perceptions that such artists possess. These accounts are rich sources of data for exploring arts worlds and practice in relation to wider configurations of social and national identity. The following data provides a means of beginning to explore such issues. The data represents responses to questions and discussion concerning the creative self and other matters in terms of a changing national context. Furthermore, the examples presented here represent forms of narrative in relation to art-in-Wales that are reflect and display three principle ways in which art is represented within the wider corpus of interview data, gathered and analysed during the course of the study. The narrative examples do not reflect these types ideally but they do display how these types can be heard and observed within the general data and the specific examples presented in this paper.

Extract 1: Artists in Wales or Welsh Art ?

- 2.I: Talking about art in Wales in a kind of general sense
3. is it possible from your point of view from your experience to talk about 'Welsh art' or is it only possible to talk about artists in Wales?
4. art' or is it only possible to talk about artists in Wales?
5.A: I think the second (.) I think you can only really talk about artists in Wales.
6. Because I am one of the few artists in Wales who paint in Welsh.
7.I: Right. Can you tell us what you mean by that?
8.A: My knowledge of Welsh is not very great but there are people who are fluent
9. in Welsh who paint in English or American. But I happen to paint in Welsh.
10. When I say that I've been told I paint in Welsh. Because my pictures do reflect
11. Wales. And they tie up with Welsh poetry and that sort of thing (.) that's what
12. I'm told. It's rather nice to be told I paint in Welsh. All these other sort of
13. fashionable avant-garde artists now (.) God knows what they paint in! It has
14. certainly got nothing to do with Wales. There is no school of Welsh art there
15. never really has been. We have a small school in North Wales but the Welsh
16. Arts Council soon put the kiss of death on that.

In terms of this narrative and account the interviewed artist responds to the opening question concerning whether it is possible to talk of 'Welsh Art' or 'Artists in Wales'. In terms of creative others the second applies, however in terms of *A*'s self-definition he refers to himself as being one of the 'few artists who paint in Welsh', although his understanding of the Welsh language is not as it might be. Thus, *A* understands Wales being mainly characterised by artists living in Wales rather than 'Welsh artists' which is viewed as a rare phenomenon. This provides a form of self-definition that he not only subscribes to but also embodies. Clearly, this is an idiosyncratic and potentially contradictory state; Welsh being a language and painting being a practice that produces a profound visual effect. However, for *A* this apparent oxymoron is transcended. His art, as described by 'others', is linked with the language of poetry and the Cymry; the two as a seamless and unproblematic reality. This self-categorisation is firmly within the, rare, rubric of the Welsh artist. This form of self-categorisation and understanding is not only located in terms of others but also contrasted with other contemporary artists in Wales. *A* asserts that '... there is no school of Welsh Art there never really has been'. He also

asserts that localised attempts to establish a college of Welsh Art in his vicinity of Wales were contested and stifled by other agencies active within the cultural field.

Thus, this form of self categorisation of creative act and artefact in terms of national structures is one that, on the one hand, preserves a notion of artists living in Wales but, on the other, displays a unique (or at least not commonplace) claim to being a Welsh Artist. This is a rare quality embodied by *A*. Thus, the particularism of the concept of Welsh Art as opposed to the universalism of artists and art in general is negotiated by the fact that such an embodiment is rare, unique and not common. This condition is explained by the fact that a school of Welsh art has, in terms of their perceptions, never existed and that attempts to do so have been stifled. This explanation is qualified in later accounts during the course of the same discussion. For *A*, this is both due to historical reasons and contemporary practices. Historically *A* refers to the lack of patronage in Wales and the condition and relationship of the Welsh aristocracy to the Welsh people. Contemporarily, whilst there are Welsh Artists and artefacts an attempt to unify or present a consistent visual presentation or narrative of such social facts had, until the contribution of Lord (2000) been noticeable by it's absence. The following account is initiated through a response to a question concerning the establishment of a recognised national collection of Welsh Art.

Extract 2: Welsh art as problematic / possible

1. A: Oh, well, no not really but they're damned if they're going to have a room for
2. Welsh art. There is no room for Welsh art in the whole of Wales. There is no
3. room for Welsh art in the National Museum. And they're buggered if there is
4. going to be one as far as I can find out.
- 5.I: Do you think that that also extends to other aspects of art? For example there
6. isn't any kind of definitive Welsh school of art in Wales as far as I understand.
- 7.A: There's no Welsh school of art (.) no. But there are Welsh artists. And how on
8. earth can a country get interested in art if they cannot see the contribution over
9. the last three hundred years of artists in Wales? And it is hopeless (.) they
10. can't do it if they can't see what's going on. If there was a gallery of Welsh art
11. in the National Museum of Wales of the last three hundred years mini buses of

12. school children would come down from around the valleys and say: Damn we
13. didn't know about this! And they would be interested as they see it. That is
14. what is so pathetic.

In this account, that follows the previous discussion, the poor visibility of Welsh Art is located and perceived in terms of contemporary practices. In this case there being no gallery or any visible organisation for Welsh Art. This point is one that connects with wider current debates in which prominent artists in Wales and members of the Welsh assembly have sought to explore ways in which the artistic legacy of Wales can be mirrored in the form of a designated space in the National gallery. Clearly, there are others who see such a manoeuvre as 'nationalistic' and limited in scope; one that does not fit well with more 'international'ⁱⁱⁱ theories of curation, organisation and display. In terms of the account produced here this is almost a call for recognising the (contested) category of 'Welsh art'. The recognisability of such a demand literally being respected not only through a process of historical re-cuperation but also a syntagmatic visual display and tangible location within a National Institution. Furthermore, it may be observed here that the discourse of Welsh Art and artist is one that is not exclusionary in principle but merely one that reflects or asserts a reality of nationhood and national experience. An imagined reality in which the next generation would be able to recognise their own visual heritage. This forms a powerful account and narrative of national re-newal and the recognition of submerged traditions, narratives and understandings that have been previously denied and currently thwarted. In this narrative Welsh Art, both its potential recovery and potential realisation, are couched in terms of a counter-hegemony; one potentially connected to post-colonial aspirations and the return of the repressed. In the following account, a different understanding of Welsh Art and Art in Wales is presented. Here the possibility of Welsh Art and Art in terms of a universal set of signifiers is displayed.

Extract 3: Art, space and place

- 2.I: As a practitioner (.) as an artist (.) do you think it's possible to talk about
3. Welsh Art or is it only possible to talk about art in Wales? Or is that too much
4. of a hard and fast distinction?
- 6.A: Well (.) they probably both exist as concepts. I think that in many areas of the
7. world (.) like in Mexico for instance (.) there would be such a thing as
8. Mexican Art. In Santa Fé they have what they call 'Western Art'. And in
9. Wales there is bound to be Welsh Art just like in Yorkshire there *is* local art
10. (.) based locally. And then there is art that transcends borders and is about
11. human beings and our life our being and that inevitably transcends nationality.
12. Now personally I think that that is greater because of its transcendence that
13. that is a greater form of art. So every locality has its what you might call
14. parochial art. And then every so often someone working that parochial art
15. does it so incredibly well that it transcends the barrier of parochial art and
16. becomes something else. But I suppose they just coexist. But specifically in
17. Wales I think that if a nation can only boast the art of its nationality (.) that is
18. if it can only boast parochial art (.) that isn't much of a recommendation
19. really.
- 20.I: So do you think there is a kind of tension between art as a universal enterprise
21. and framing it within a category or a national identity or whatever?
- 22.A: Can I just add to that? Just to say that although I would tend to say that
23. universal art (.) or you might say art that is unrestricted (.) is greater than
24. parochial art (.) just to stress that point (.) that sometimes parochial art can
25. arise to become profound. But ultimately it's a silly restriction to put a stamp
26. of any particular nation on art that happens to come from there is a silly thing.
- 27.I: In terms of art that that is done Wales (.) for example (.) thinking about it in a
28. wider sense (.) though your work addresses transcendental issues which are
29. perhaps of interest and of significance to human beings rather than specific
30. sections of the population or groups and so forth (.) Is there any way in which
31. your experience of being located in Wales does that have any effect on the
32. type of work that you do? Perhaps in the past or the way you've developed or
33. where you're going (.) is there any way in which your location does affect
34. your work?
35. A: I think there probably is an effect. But it's no more specific than a kind of
36. psychic gloominess. There is a gloom. I think in this weird magical country of
37. mists and heavy layers of cloud and hills. I think the gloom finds it's way into
38. my work. The ephemeral uncertainty.
39. I: The environmental in one sense?
40. A: Yes it's just that. Because that moulds a population as well. The weather
41. changes the psychology of a nation doesn't it?

In terms of the account provided here the concepts of Welsh Art and Artists living in Wales are understood to be ones that can 'co-exist'. In terms of the notion of national frames of artistic practice this is a form of life that is readily recognised and compared to

'Mexican Art' and, in Sante Fe, a form of artistic practice denominated as 'western art'. The account provides for an understanding in which Welsh art is a perfectly realisable and recognisable concept and practice. However, the notion of Welsh Art being '... just like in Yorkshire' interpolates the notion of the visual nation as one that can be equated with the local or regional. Art based in terms of the locale, as opposed to art that might resonate with notions of people, nation and submerged, sidelined, unrecognised experiences. Thus the potential for Welsh Art *is* recognised but within the terms of a particular discursive construction; that of the local as opposed to the national. The second part of this account (10 - 19) responds to the question by displaying an understanding of Art-in-Wales as a concept that reflects a universal conceptualisation of art. Here art, wherever it may be produced, transcends borders, 'about human beings and our life our being', a concept of spirituality and the aesthetic that transcends nationality. In terms of this account, it is the universal power of art to transcend boundaries that is of significance (12 - 14). The account continues by building on a mode of discursive representation in which Wales as a locale is then connected to a third part of a discursive chain, in this case the parochial. (Wales → Local → Parochial). This form of discursive constitution of Nation is specified in terms of Wales 'specifically' (L.16) and not at the level of nations in general. It is qualified in terms of the assertion that 'if a nation can only boast the art of it's nationality' (.) that is if it can only boast parochial art (.) that isn't much of a recommendation really' (L. 18 - 19). Clearly, the notion of Welsh Art, though not necessarily other forms of art couched in national criteria, is viewed as one that is local and parochial; particular as opposed to universal.

Extract 4: Constructing identity and locating the creative self

- 1.I: I'll just shift topic, but I would like to come back to that. Do you see yourself
2. as an artist in Wales or as a Welsh artist?
- 3.A: Well at the moment both. Going to London was interesting because

3. there are more artists there than anywhere else and it's a very sort of cut and
4. thrust place, you're very much aware of how people promote themselves as
5. artists and as people as well, that's so much a part of it, especially nowadays.
6. And everyone really is in the business of exploiting whatever, and rightly so as
7. well, of exploiting whatever they have in their life that makes them different
8. from every other artist that's around. Because that enriches their work if it is
9. genuinely a part of them and part of their work it's a case of promoting it. If
10. you go to London it's such a multinational and multiracial place, and the
11. artistic community is even more so or at least as much so that people are in the
12. business of saying "I'm from here, this is me, this is what I bring to the
13. picture, to this cultural pot that you are dipping into" so people are really quite
14. upfront about it, where they're and what they're about. So in a way that did
15. make me think about my own relationship to where I'm from.
- 17.I: By going away?
- 18.A: Well, by going to London specifically, but by going away generally, yes. It
19. made me realise that the work I want to make is about the sort of places where
20. I've lived. That hasn't always been Wales. It's been to do with the kind of
21. places that have been important to me, which have often been coastal, isolated
22. or remote countryside, the wilder parts of the world. And I have become aware
23. that that is what I want to talk about even if it's not where I'm making the
24. images that I want to deal with, just because they are important to me.
25. I: Do you think there is such a thing as Welsh art as an artist?
26. A: Well, on a basic level yes, of course. Are you saying that there are themes in
27. Welsh art that make them different from themes that are in other art? That
28. there is something inherent in the style and the approach of a style?
29. I: If you like.
30. A: In the visual arts I don't really know whether that's true. It's not as strong a
31. tradition in Wales as say music or writing. Or at least it doesn't have as high a
32. profile, but I think that's changing. But I don't define myself in relation to
33. other Welsh artists any differently than I do to other artists that I'm interested
34. in. Obviously there are Welsh artists who are very definitely addressing Welsh
35. issues, but that is a different thing. When you say is there such a thing as
36. Welsh art, I kind of think that that's meaningless. Is there a kind of school, a
37. style, a way of thinking about work which is inherently Welsh I'm not sure
38. that that's true.

In terms of the narrative presented here the creative self is located within a wider art world that allows the condition of being a Welsh artist and an artist in Wales. The relationship between the creative self, location and identity figure prominently within this account. Recent experience of working in London is referred to, here the art world is characterised in terms of 'cut and thrust' and the profile of a multicultural demographic is alluded to. Furthermore issues of identity are seen to be important within this art world (L.13, 14). This includes where one is from, self-definition and what one brings to the

cultural pot of this multicultural scene. Thus various biographical and reflective resources are central to this *presentation* of creative self in this dense and busy art world. In this scene, the business of presenting your creative self is central to promoting oneself as an artist (L.5) and of using various cultural resources in order to accomplish not only visibility but *difference*. Difference can be understood in terms of achieving recognition of unique creative quality. This is the hard currency of creative cultural capital. Thus, in terms of this narrative, it is not merely a question of promotion leading to visibility or a high profile but also of exploiting resources (these may be biographical, where you are from as well as your work) as a means of accomplishing difference. Difference is therefore not merely accomplished in terms of works of art but also in terms of the biographical details, geographical details or 'whatever'. Indeed the accomplishment of identity as well as the production of works of art, in this scene or 'field' (Bourdieu, 1977), are presented as equally important, 'people promote themselves as artists and as people as well, that's so much part of it nowadays' (L.6). In terms of the artists experience of the London art scene he suggests that this stimulated reflection on his own biography and identity.

This identity is one that does not exclusively link with the national parameters of Wales. It is one that includes Wales but also links with remote parts of the countryside, and isolated coastal areas. Within this narrative the possibility of 'Welsh artists' is acknowledged although it is one that is not of primary importance in terms of the creative self being presented. The notion of 'Welsh art' is viewed as meaningless (although this is prefaced by a view that this may change). However, what is of interest here is the way in which other forms of creative endeavour (e.g. poetry, music) are able to be subject to national parameters and boundaries. Art and visual art in particular is seen to have a problematic relation with the parameters of nation proffered in this account.

Welsh art, accounts and type

In terms of the exemplar narratives analysed and discussed in this paper a number of points can be advanced. Firstly, whilst artists experience and perceptions of the creative self in relation to wider social categories and processes are unique, they also exhibit certain typical characteristics. These typical characteristics do not constitute a single homogenous type. Rather these typical characteristics can be subdivided into particular positional/perspectival types. The importance of these types is twofold. Firstly they represent a way of beginning to understand the discursive characteristics of the visual Arts in Wales and secondly display the type of discursive moves and cultural understandings that can be inferred and associated with this particular art world. In some respects these can be understood not merely as types but forms of social representation or frames that find resonance within elite artists' accounts.

Welsh Art

Within this discursive representation, grounded as it is in lived experience, the notion of being submerged, peripheral and contested is evident. In the case where this form of representation is exhibited in its most pure form (Extract 1) the phenomenon of 'Welsh Art' is understood and portrayed as a rare entity. It is also constituted in terms that are deeply embedded and connected to Welsh life, landscape and, in an attempt to overcome the dichotomy and compartmentalisation of the verbal and the visual, language. Its contested nature and submerged, even oppressed, character is made recognisable through accounts that relay stories of organisational interference (by organisations viewed as sometimes colonial in attitude and action or at least unsympathetic). This sense is also

relayed through accounts of a lack of organic organisation in terms of grounded and culturally aware sites of artistic pedagogy e.g. designated, established and developed Art Colleges in Wales. These narratives both seek to recuperate a submerged history of Welsh art production and identify agencies of cultural hegemony that exclude national facts and cultural 'realities'.

Art in the Locale

Within this discursive frame artistic and creative practices occur within a whole range of locales; the city, the region and the nation. Whilst some nations can legitimately claim a national narrative for art others cannot. In the example here 'Wales' provides such a category. This is in stark contrast to the previous narrative form. Furthermore, Art in the locale is a legitimate cultural and spatial formation that is not at odds with the principles of universalism and transcendence. Certain national parameters are viewed as restrictive, parochial and limiting. This discursive framework negates the 'potential' and 'actual' levels of experience being authentically accorded to the creative self within a meaningful national/cultural milieu as a primary or central concern of artistic endeavour. Furthermore, the principle of locale can also invoke notions of landscape and other geographical features in a way that does not necessarily equate with notions of national identity. Although in the case of Wales and other national communities, landscape represents a powerful resource for national forms of identity appropriation, construction and representation.

Art as a Universal/Transcendental

Art as a universal is commensurate with certain modern ideas concerning the conceptualisation of artistic practice. In terms of the creative self and the negotiation of national parameters the universal language of artistic endeavours and products

overwhelm the particular considerations of national circumstances, experiences or influences. This represents one form of narrative of the creative self in which autonomy of the created and creator is assumed. However, not only does it eschew the many consequences of purely national concerns but is also associated with social processes, for example, the allocation of scarce resources, patronage and so forth. In many respects the frame and social representation of art in terms of universalism provides an 'othering device' in talk and accounts of Art, Identity and Wales. It is the antithesis to all those accounts that seek to situate Artistic practice and organisation in terms of national contexts or experiences. The notion of universalism does not fit well with the post-modern ethic of diversity, plurality and the rejection of grand-narratives. However, the notion of cosmopolitanism may provide a means through which such accounts of national-cultural experience can re-engage with values and principles that stand outside particular concerns. A discursive means of straddling the universal and the particular during a period of cultural modernisation in Wales. Within this paper, and the data set as a whole, cosmopolitanism was not an idea that had explicit purchase although it may provide a means through which the universal vs. particular may be negated. However, this discussion remains outside the parameters of this specific paper.

Conclusion

None of the exemplar narratives here represent a 'pure form' of the narrative 'repertoires' or reflect the discursive positions described above. This is, of course, to be expected, such accounts are principled positions that are renditions, stand on behalf of and report and reflect on experience, practice and expert understandings. The readings of doubt and methodological scepticism do not form a foci for this specific paper. The negotiation of the creative self in relation to frames of national identity conform, in part, to specific biographical profiles. Time, history and experience are central components to the stories

told here. However, the positioning of narratives, an expression of certain biographical details, is merely one part of the story. These narratives form meaningful accounts and attempts to account for both a contested history of creative production in Wales and the contemporary cultural field during a time of cultural and political reflection and change. As such they are worthy of the most careful consideration and scrutiny as such narratives can also be understood to represent collective 'positionings' (Maine, 2002). The frames of the reflective-creative self in relation to a changing apparatus of national definition is of import. In terms of the exemplar narratives explored here the tension between universalism and particularism features heavily. Furthermore, a notion of nation as parochial and nation as an important but submerged discourse of self-understanding and cultural articulation is also observable. The contested character of the field reflects contemporary social facts. The notion of Wales in the cultural sphere is not only contested but is also 'up for grabs'. Thus, these exemplar narratives are not only passive reflections but represent accounts of 'structuralised' cultural practice (Thomas, 1937) that report on the way in which cultural institutions and artistic traditions are constantly being negotiated and are the product of a variety of sustained social processes and interactions. They form understandings and experiences that mobilise and make use of contested historical accounts and sociological profiles in order to both situate the creative self in contemporary circumstances and current debates. These current debates (a room for Welsh Art in the National Gallery, the distribution of resources, the promotion of specific representation[s] and the character of creative careers) are therefore both reflected and constituted by such accounts. They are constituted both in terms of the situated enunciation of narrative in the interview and their articulation and re-articulation by prominent artists within other domains of social commentary. Thus, this paper analyses and reports on the character of such narratives and recognises their wider circulation and uses. These narratives display not only collectivised positions but also the

circulation of discursive types that enable an understanding and contestation of the discursive and practical field of Art in Wales. These narratives also report on the presentation of the creative self in relation to wider social structures, parameters and scenes.

To this extent these narratives of the creative self, by prominent artists in Wales, represent crucial data for explaining, exploring and understanding artistic endeavour within post-devolution Wales. The practice of 'telling' as reflected in other works (e.g. *Welsh Artists Talking*) provides a resource through which the often relegated voices of artists can be both heard and mobilised as a means of contributing to this ongoing cultural debate. These strong narratives, like visual representations, become powerful resources for informing, shifting and shaping the discourse and contours of debate and cultural decision making (e.g. debates and consultation organised by the Institute for Welsh Affairs, the National Assembly and BBC Wales). To this extent the narrative explored here represent typical discursive positions that are in circulation both in print, by word of mouth and other forms of social network. Indeed many of the narrative accounts reflexively display their positioning in terms of other cultural networks, artists and art scenes. Thus, whilst they are situated accounts, for members they are positioned and connected to wider sets of collective experience and understanding. A crucial feature of the accounts reported within the limitations of this paper is the contested character of 'Welsh Art'. It is characterised by contested boundaries ranging from explicit scepticism to individual embodiment. It may well be worthwhile to theorise that the narrative reality of contested boundaries reflects certain cultural and social realities of post-devolution Wales aswell as the contested character of artistic practice in general. Clearly, a creative space in which a national conceptualisation of visual narrative can be advanced is one that is questioned aswell as promoted. However, it also displays the way in which the discursive construction of such a tradition in Wales and other nations is founded upon a

diversity of views and understandings. The development of a coherent narrative for the visual arts in Wales has now been established in the form of Peter Lords book *Imaging the Nation* (2000) and calls to establish a place for Welsh Art in the National Gallery. Thus the emergence of a visual narrative for Wales is well underway. This represents an explicitly and conscious attempt at imagining a 'visual nation' in a space where it had not previously been acknowledged. A crucial feature in building up and operationalising such strong narratives is recognition. There was simply no narrative through which various creative artefacts and individuals in Wales, both past and present, could be discursively realised, enunciated and represented. It may well be that such intellectual work can be compared to ideal typical legislative function of the modern intellectual (Bauman, 1987). Indeed, the construction of a story, a presentation of a story for the visual arts in Wales, is realised within a context of difference, debate and rancour. However, by analysing the perceptions and expectations of artists in Wales we not only learn a great deal about art, identity and the nation but also the manner in which discursive representations of cultural sites, spaces and places are never 'true' or 'accurate'. They are always partial 'will to truths' that impose a version of events and discursive frames upon, in this case, a national story. They are themselves social, cultural and political acts that promote certain world-views and discourses concerning national, identity and understanding. The picture from Wales is, I would suggest, little different from other historical and contemporary (e.g. Brit-Art) attempts at imaging, 'branding' or 'legislating' in terms of various creative practices in terms of necessary national 'fictions', boundaries of experience and collective historical experience. In the case of Wales this process is, however, tainted by other historical experiences, that testify to a submerged, sidelined and ignored visual story that has as much right to expression (and surely contestation) as other national fictions in other parts of the world. In many respects the discourse of Art in Wales is one shaped by the experiences of the periphery and economic decline. In terms of this location visual

culture provides a resource through which new forms of national expression/prestige and identity can be realised.

In terms of social-cultural precedent some comparison to other nations pursuing forms of national renewal and re-invigoration can be located. The intellectual debate in Ireland during the early part of the C20th testifies to this. The Celtic revival of the 1880's explicitly sought to recover and construct a distinct Irish culture. An important aspect of this process was the pursuit of a construction of a national artistic tradition. The initial means through which this was to be realised was through the establishment of a national art collection. According to Herrero (2002:61) this was seen to encapsulate two functions, firstly as a means of constructing an authentic and distinct Irish-Celtic visual narrative and as means of helping Ireland ascend 'modernity's hierarchy of nations'. Furthermore, it was the opinion of Irish intellectuals of the time (in particular the ideas of Hugh Lane encapsulated in a letter to the *Irish Times*, 15th of January, 1903) that the establishment of a national collection and the physical establishment of a national gallery would help alleviate the paucity of art education in Ireland. For Lane the establishment of a contemporary school of modern Irish art was central to the modernization process and the securing of Ireland's place alongside other established 'modern' nations. Herrero (2002) asserts that this was a form of practice, alluded to earlier, associated with what Bauman (1987, 1992) has described as the 'legislators of modernity'. For Herrero (2002) the active practice of pursuing such a course of action was an important process in establishing a form of cultural modernity for Ireland. This process was characterised by public debate concerning what the collection should include. The debate polarised around two principle positions; namely an 'introspective position' and an 'internationalist' position. This account of Irish intellectuals, the establishment of national collections and artistic practice has strong parallels with the experience of Wales. In terms of the national context of Wales' attempts at legislation are observable and institutions developed and

their consequences experienced. These processes have also been polarised around what Herrero describes as internationalist *vs* introspective lines and what I have identified as the universal *vs* particular dimensions of the visual arts in Wales. The future of this debate and the potential of transcending such dichotomies by appreciating the existence of other forms of cultural understanding remains, at least at this stage of cultural re-energisation in Wales, a possibility.

In terms of contemporary conditions in Wales, as in other parts of the world, visual culture and sites for the display of visual culture have been used and are being used to promote certain notions of identity, from post-devolution national identities to multiculturalism. The visual arts alongside other creative endeavours are also being marshalled as a resource for the regeneration of areas of economic decline. The new demand for the consumption of 'art' and its wider aesthetic and spiritual function in societies experiencing religious decline represents a powerful resource for social integration. Consequently, the fact that the narratives of visual culture are highly contested by the artists themselves demands examination. It suggests that such narratives for visual culture (and consumption) do not always equate with the understanding and experiences of the artists. In this respect the attempts to construct or legislate meta-narratives for various national visual cultures submerges (some) of the voices of those who produce the visual products, especially those whose biography and identity claims do not fit neatly with the contours of the new narrative. Furthermore, a concern with aesthetic production by highly creative individuals as opposed to mere consumption or mass *re*-production represents a form of resistance to the colonisation of the living world and aesthetic practice with the principles of the market place, consumption and its resultant waste (Bauman, 2003). In short, certain strong visual narratives can be used by legislators in constructing certain versions of events and spaces through which collective experiences and understandings can be displayed and inform other (e.g. educational)

practices. Thus it is important that such voices are heard in order to inform a narrative of a visual nation, that report on the contested character of artistic practice and national cultural appropriation as one that is diverse rather than monolithic, contested rather than passively accepted, productive as opposed to all consuming, vibrant rather than dull. As has been previously suggested the agents of cultural modernization in Wales can learn from other precedents. However, in terms of late modernity, the legislation of visual narratives should be open to participatory scrutiny. A crucial dimension of such participatory scrutiny is to be found in the voices of those who produce visual artefacts in the first place. Whilst the discourse of '(post)modern cultural legislation' denies the author such rights; it does so by excluding valuable insights and understandings that if allowed visible and audible expression will surely result in a form of visual narrative of cultural renaissance and regeneration that represents both the unique collective experience of Wales and the diversity of late modern Welshness (Fevre and Thompson, 1999). This manoeuvre would avoid the polarising effects of introspection *vs* internationalism and represent a more pluralistic path for the management and promotion of the current cultural renaissance in Wales.

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Notes

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ⁱⁱ Ironically, postmodern theories of curation and display are increasingly international and almost universally acknowledged.