



Katherine Jones

Jun 30

Cymerau Spring Festival Conversations Part 1

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Reflections on Cymerau in the Spring - Katherine Jones and Tom Payne

From May 26th to 29th the Cymerau artists and community members showcased creative projects devised with and for people in the Borth and Tal-y-bont area in Ceredigion, mid Wales.

*This included **Beached: The Final Landing** by Jane Lloyd-Francis and Gwilym Morus-Baird; **Water Surgery** by Jess Allen; **Y Gors** by Dafydd Sills-Jones, Anne Marie Carty and Nick Jones; **Edafedd-dwr** by Ffion Jones; **The Water Shed** by residents of the Borth Community Allotments and **Stories, Songs, Science and the Sea** by Peter Stevenson, Erin Kavanagh and Lynne Denman.*

The following is written conversation between two participants in these events. Tom Payne was involved in organising the Spring Gathering with other members of the local team. Katherine Jones is a former Aberystwyth resident and is a Towards Hydrocitizenship team member working on the Water City Bristol case study.

Ar Lan y Leri

The weekend began on Thursday evening with *Beached: The Final Landing*, which was the last installment in a series of walks and public events organised by Jane and Gwilym under the title *Ar Lan y Leri* (beside the Leri). The Leri is one of three rivers that run through the Cymerau Case study area; the others include the Ceulan and the Dyfi, all of which combine in the waters of the Dyfi Estuary which flow into the Cardigan Bay.

Katherine: A group of mainly Borth residents assemble at the Ynyslas nature reserve for a short walk inland along the edge of the main Ynys Las car park and along to the river Leri. At this point, the mouth of the river, we are treated to Suzanne Iuppa reading some beautiful poetry. Suzanne has come down from Mold, and has an American accent. Her poems are a response to a landscape initially unfamiliar to her, but they have bubbled up through impressions and conversations gathered through walking some of the Leri. For my own part, having grown up in this area, I never knew this particular river which runs past the back of the Borth train track, and along part of the

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
































































coastal path which I have walked, is called the Leri.



Tom: I have never walked inland at Ynylslas. Every other time I have been here I've followed the boardwalk through the dunes out towards the sea. I am reminded of a time many years ago that I had a brief part in a film playing Timothy Spall's body double. I had to sit on a bench in a long trench coat so that the filmmakers could film him/me from behind looking out to the horizon; not the most flattering casting decision. Further inland, close to the boat yard at the mouth of the Leri, I'm taking in the awesome view that stretches eastwards beyond the flat esturine landscape to the hills above Tal-y-bont. I can see small white windmills spinning briskly on and between the green peaks as I listen intently to James Meek talk about the wrecked ships that lie below the surface of the water in the estuary. Small wooden posts jut upwards, some distance away, marking the location of one of the vessels. I can hear James' voice clearly, even at a distance, like he is speaking to me in a small room, which is surreal, given the backdrop. It's difficult to bring our immediate location into relation with the enormity of the vista, which seems somehow like it might be a painting on enormous stage flats.




Katherine: We meander back to the nature reserve centre where chairs have been set up for an audience, to watch Jane and Gwilym share their impressions from their three-day journey from source to sea of this river. The walls are adorned with pictures of snakes and birds, and a list of birds recently spotted in the Ynylslas nature reserve. Jane and Gwilym's impressions involve recorded conversations, recounted stories of encounter

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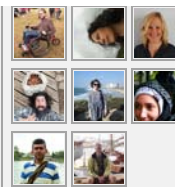
Members

(with the owners of a watermill, with a hare...) and musical compositions ranging from electronic loops of mbira music, and folk songs in Welsh with accompanying ukulele or mandolin.

Tom: The event takes the form of a staged conversation between the two performers. Opening occasionally to include the audience who respond with interest and offer corrections or additional insights. The autobiographical nature of their account is inviting and allows me to make connections with places that I have never been. Following their narrative, I travel downstream with them from location to location, imaging myself deep within the rural Welsh landscape east of the estuary. They weave music, poetry, anecdotes and historical facts into their personal accounts of the places that they passed through on their way from source to sea, and in doing so produce a layered account of this part of Wales.

Katherine: At the end of the performance, Gwilym plays the last conversation between himself and Jane, recorded at the 'end' of the Leri as it reaches and flows out into the Dyfi Estuary. They muse on what an ending even means, this is the end of what is called the Leri, but not an ending in any meaningful way for the water that flows, which will flow into the sea, evaporate, rain down again, flow again through the river, and so on, infinitely. It's an ending though of a conversation begun by the Cymerau project, and they muse on this too. Is it art, they wonder? Particularly the representation that they have treated us to. The journey and the conversations along the way were the art posits Jane, but supposes that the outcome, this sharing, is also art.

Tom: In conversation with Suzie Gablik, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to the 'art of living'; this is not the art of the gallery or the museum, or professional artists, although she's quick to point out that it's anything but amateur, it's the art of 'domestic interiors, the table, food, language [...] the arts of sociability, conversation, etiquette and dress' (<https://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/gablik.pdf>). For me, Jane and Gwilym's representation of their three-day journey down the river Leri is a poetic construction of lived experience. It includes their encounters with people and place, the micro politics involved in spending prolonged periods of time in the company of another person, making decisions about which turning take, and so on. But its also much more than that, this lived experience has a poetic inflection constituted by Gwilym's mindful act of composing music by the river or in response to the landscape, and Jane's beautifully written prose. Their deliberate act of walking is artfully performed and represented here, in a mode of exposition that invites us to attend not just to the narrative, but to the place in which the story is being told. Two words/phrases that they used to describe their journey - 'honouring' and 'paying attention to' really stuck out to me. Particularly when used in relation to water. The event is an 'honouring', a 'paying attention to' that invites us to do the same. It's a gentle invitation, but it's a political one too. For me it's saying something very firmly about our abstracted relationship to the water that we use and the natural environment from which it comes. But it's also one that speaks of a particular privilege, which the artists themselves draw attention to, that of being able to step outside of everyday life and to spend time, watching, listening, thinking, 'pay attention', 'honouring'...



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Katherine: Later I have a conversation with Tom around the questions of 'what is art?' 'what is participatory art?' 'what is community art?'. I remember back to a philosophy course I took a very long time ago with a reading list that included Tolstoy's *What is Art?* Tolstoy's argument, as I remember it, is that the best form of art is that which is the most common, that is to say the type of art that the most people can relate to. It shouldn't be obscure, or refer to things or even spiritual or emotional senses that would not be easily identifiable to the person least interested in the study of art. Tolstoy's argument is very much about inclusivity. The Cymerau project and the Towards Hydrocitizenship project as a whole, also aspires to this kind of inclusivity, and this is realized in the various sub-commissions emerging from it, though inevitably, events are prone to attracting the same group of people who happen to be interested in these sorts of things. Questions also arise around differing understandings of art and creativity. The constraint of inclusiveness can mean that more edgy and difficult creative pieces are excluded. In the Bristol case study for example, we have had rather an extensive focus on tides and tidal landscapes in Bristol without touching much on legacies of slavery, issues of flooding, or explicitly thinking about the effects of a tidal barrage, although at points in the programme all of these things came up and were talked about. Yet the creative work itself was not about engaging with and addressing these more difficult topics in a direct way, and I have wondered at times whether we are watering down (pardon the pun), the darkness as well as the light that is existent in all life. Rebecca Solnit talks about how life is a combination of dark and light, and that we need to embrace both in our understanding of it....

So is this art? Is it good art? Is it participatory art? Do the answers to any of these questions matter?



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