
¶ DARK DAYS IN VENICE

John Cale returns to Wales to make work for the Biennale and Ric returns to Venice to see it.

I was 18, the last time I was in Venice, and I had no money. I possessed only a blanket, a toothbrush, a harmonica and a passport. My lift had dropped me off somewhere in Mestre, and I remember walking into Venice proper across the Causeway and on into St Mark's Square, not realising, in my youthful ignorance, that even breaking wind in Venice is an expensive business. So I blew in and out of Venice swiftly, sleeping that night, I think, in a disused railway carriage, that I had chanced upon in some toxic industrial backwater.

At that time I was completely high on traveling light and I was in love with the Velvet Underground, 20 years too late of course, but that in no way dampened my ardour.

It was the other-worldliness which they emanated so easily, and their hypnotic leather slap rhythm, that drew me in irresistibly and gave voice to all manner of angst I could not otherwise readily vocalise.

It was strangely poignant for me to be back in Venice in 2009, with some money in my pocket, and it was stranger still that my teenage icon, John Cale, co-founder of the Velvet Underground should be representing Wales in the 53rd Venice Biennale.

For the event, John had created *Dyddiau Du* (Dark Days), a 46 minute film to be shown across multiple screens, at the the Capannone (beer store), on the island of Guidecca, a little way by vaporetto from the dual throbbing hearts of the Biennale (the Arsenale and the Giardini). It is an awe inspiring space. Its pocked and scarred walls resemble the inside of a giant sarcophagus, created for some ancient king.

The film is set in four locations, one of which, his childhood home, is examined in every decaying detail, by a camera slowly revolving through 360 degrees. Thus he invited us to embark on a visceral and complex re-engagement with his own past and his Welsh roots. The work cohered for me when it was at its most raw and pared down; in particular the tortuously lingering journey through the house and the tightly cropped sequence of John's face, displaying increasing exhaustion, as he runs up the brutally steep steps of an old quarry.

John's native mode of expression is music, and this became apparent as the exquisite sound track, which formed the backbone of the work, was quietly unfurled. In the words of Guardian Journalist, Jonathon Jones, we are, in essence, being offered, 'a filmed concept album'. For the purist this is problematic, falling as it does outside the esoteric vernacular, customarily employed within the visual arts community; indeed, the unusual approach tripped me up initially. Art however, like biological life, thrives in a variety of surprising environments and, in the broader scheme, the challenge to our pre-conceptions should be applauded.

The press release for *Dyddiau Du* attempts to encapsulate the work in a thick and sticky layer of industrial strength art speak; this is ironic since this is not the thinly veiled trumpeting of shallow nationalistic agendas, which might require such corse-try, and nor is it the vacuous, self-referential navel gazing of the media-savvy career artist. I walked away, that day, with an even greater respect for JC than I had had for him 20 years prior to his Biennale offering; what he had allowed us to witness in *Dyddiau Du* was the painfully candid exhumation of his own troubled heart. - **b**



Dyddiau Du / Dark Days, John Cale 2009. (Production still from Maes - Y- Wern)
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