

Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State

Walker & Bromwich



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Llechi a Llafur / Slate or State

Walker & Bromwich's project *Llechi a Llafur / Slate or State* at Penrhyn Castle, a National Trust property in North Wales, was the culmination of a series of artist residencies at the property, commissioned through the Trust New Art programme as the first partnership between the Trust and Arts Council Wales (2014-17).

Walker & Bromwich's project draws on their participatory art practice and experience of working with communities to explore "the role art can play as an active agent in society, evolving environments and situations within which people can begin to re-examine the world around them."

Their response to the brief to show "Penrhyn in a world context" focussed on The Great Strike of 1900-03, a bitter dispute about pay and working conditions between the Welsh workers at Penrhyn Slate Quarry and its English owners, the Pennant Family, who built the Castle on the profits they made from local slate. The artists collaborated with Côr y Penrhyn (the local male voice choir), locally-based artists and

other community participants to bring Welsh voices inside the Castle and foreground the story of The Great Strike through a performance with supporting artworks – banners stating the original demands of the striking quarry workers and a large inflatable sculpture representing the quarry – also co-produced with the community. The artworks together with a film documenting the project were exhibited in the Castle until the end of the summer season.

Llechi a Llafur / Slate or State is an early example of an emerging trend in contemporary art commissions in heritage sites other than museums to engage artists in revealing hidden and marginalised histories by working with local communities. In the context of Penrhyn, Walker & Bromwich's project can be characterised as an act of social justice that empowered the local community to address both historic and present-day inequities.

OUTPUTS

1. Community workshops (March - April 2017)

Devised by Walker & Bromwich with poet Rhys Trimble and locally-based artists working with community participants to produce choral chants in Welsh, banners and an inflatable sculpture.

2. Banners (2017)

Material: Cotton, Number: 3

Made by Walker & Bromwich supported by locally-based artists working with community participants, featuring the demands made by quarryworkers during The Great Strike.

3. Inflatable sculpture (2017)

Material: Waxed Cotton, Size H 5m x W 4.7m x D 4.6m

Made by Walker & Bromwich supported by locally-based artists working with community participants, representing Penrhyn Quarry.

4. Performance (1 July 2017)

Devised by Walker & Bromwich with Rhys Trimble and locally-based artists working with Côt y Penrhyn and community participants, consisting of:

- Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Secondary School, Bethesda – screening of film and performance by school choir of the call-and-response chant composed with Rhys Trimble featuring the demands of The Great Strike.
- Bethesda – procession led by Rhys Trimble of the banners and inflatable sculpture carried through the streets by members of the Penrhyn Choir and other community participants to the gates of Penrhyn Castle
- Penrhyn Castle – performance by Penrhyn Choir of Welsh songs connected to The Great Strike to an audience of 200 local people and visitors in front of the gates before taking the sculpture inside to be installed in the Great Hall with further songs performed by the Choir.

OUTPUTS

5. Film (2017)

Llechi a Llafur / Slate or State, Walker & Bromwich, film (25 mins, Welsh language subtitled in English, co-produced with Culture Colony Vision)

Devised by Walker & Bromwich with Peter Telfer of Culture Colony Vision, Rhys Trimble and locally-based artists, featuring interviews with community participants, documenting the history of The Great Strike, the development of the project and the performance at Penrhyn Castle.

<https://vimeo.com/250633831>

Film also available as a separate file on this USB

6. Exhibition (1 July – 5 November 2017)

Llechi a Llafur / Slate or State, Penrhyn Castle, North Wales
Consisting of inflatable sculpture and film screened on a loop.

Other film screenings

Whitley Bay ArtHouses festival, (18 & 19 August 2018)
Culture Colony (released, 8 November, 2017)
'Neuadd Ogwen, art centre, Bethesda, North Wales.(5 November, 2017)

Research Questions

How can participatory arts practice empower communities to influence their representation within authorised heritage organisations and address both historic and contemporary inequities?

Research Aims

Through their participatory arts practice, involving embedded research methods and collaboration, Walker & Bromwich aimed to co-author artworks with community participants that would re-present the story of The Great Strike inside Penrhyn Castle. With the community's involvement and through their voices, the performance and artworks would temporarily shift power relations between the people of Bethesda and the Castle, not only highlighting the injustices of the past but drawing parallels with their marginalised status in the present-day. The project would leave a lasting legacy in the form of the artworks and the film, and also in this empowering act that would re-inscribe history and give the community strength through a renewed shared sense of identity.



Penrhyn Castle, National Trust, North Wales

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*

Penrhyn Castle, as a National Trust property celebrating the cultural values and biographies of the English aristocracy, is representative of heritage sites that validate the so-called “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006) over more pluralistic and representative approaches to history. Despite the Pennant Family’s connection to the slate quarry, this is referenced only once inside the Castle through a painting made to commemorate the visit of Princess Victoria in 1832. The story of The Great Strike is not in evidence, nor is Penrhyn’s wider context as part of the slate landscape of North Wales that was strongly associated with Welsh national identity and culture, and in particular that of the Welsh-speaking villages of Bethesda and others in the Ogwen Valley where the slate quarry workers lived.

The strike, one of the longest in British industrial history, contributed to the decline of the Welsh slate industry and was a significant factor in the development of trade unionism and the Labour movement. It also divided the local community as some workers took financial incentives to break the strike, causing deep rifts between families which are still felt today. This can account for the antipathy expressed towards the Castle by local people, many of whom have vowed never to

step foot inside. For the families of the striking quarry workers who still live in Bethesda, the Castle with its opulent interiors, paid for by the profits made from the slate industry, is an ever-present reminder of the exploitation of their ancestors who endured poverty and hardship during the strike.



Trust New Art, the partnership between the Arts Council and the National Trust, was established in 2009 but the artist residencies at Penrhyn Castle (2014-17) were the first to be commissioned under its banner in Wales as part of a second phase of activity. The residencies were designed with a phased approach, with the scale and scope of the commissions increasing over a three-year period. In part they were aimed at addressing that less than 10% of visitors to the Castle came from the local community as part of a wider audience development strategy reflecting cultural policy endorsing participation and inclusivity (Culture White Paper, 2016). The programme invited artists “to establish a dialogue with the staff, volunteers and audiences at Penrhyn, and to demonstrate the potential of artistic interventions.” (NT project brief, 2014)

It culminated in 2016-17 with a year-long residency intended to deliver a large-scale collaborative or participatory project. The call for applications offered a project budget of £38,000 to artists with at least ten years’ experience of delivering similar commissions and with “a high level of peer recognition.” Walker & Bromwich were awarded the commission in August 2016.

Penrhyn Castle, National Trust, North Wales

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*



Walker & Bromwich engage with debates about the role of participatory art as an emancipatory practice that has the potential to propose alternative realities (Matarasso 2007, 2019). It is dialogic and ethnographic in nature, founded in embedded research (Coles 2000, Kester 2004). Through large-scale participatory and theatrical events, their co-collaborators are invited to “imagine the future through the past”, and given authorship over their representation in ways that advance cultural democracy and create a shared sense of identity. While their performances are more playful and imaginary than precedents such as Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave* (2001), the social intent of Walker & Bromwich’s work is similarly central to its outcome.

‘Slate or State’ uses the affective qualities of music and language to create an emotional impact in both participants and audiences, evident both in the performance and the film. The foreboding black presence of the inflatable sculpture representing Penrhyn Quarry is juxtaposed against the backdrop of the lavishly-decorated Castle, utilising the aesthetics of disruption and antagonism to provoke a response in viewers (Bishop 2004, 2006).

The project also operates within the long-established artistic practice of institutional critique, but now within the context of a heritage site as opposed to a museum or art gallery. Walker & Bromwich draw on the practice of artists such as Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser to question the values of the institution which appears to value its material artefacts more than the heritage of the community that surrounds it. However, the performance is also a conciliatory act, with the artist acting as mediator in re-negotiating the relationship between community and heritage site through the performative event (Marstine 2017).



Performance: *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*, 1st July 2017, Photography: Mark Pinder, Michael Pollard, Procession of the inflatable sculpture from Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen in Bethesda to Penrhyn Castle, Wales.

Walker & Bromwich stayed in North Wales in advance of the open day held for prospective applicants for the final residency, helping them to understand the context of the Castle and its history as well as present-day attitudes towards it. Although the residency at Penrhyn Castle included accommodation within the Castle, the artists realised that this would undermine their ability to make useful contacts and develop relationships with the community, preferring to stay in Bethesda itself. This embedded approach to research gave them greater access to locally-based artists, historians and others who became key advocates for the project within the community, helped navigate communication issues with the Welsh language, and took on key roles in the co-production of the performance and artworks. It also helped to diminish the artists' status as "outsiders".

As well as research within the community, Walker & Bromwich visited other local attractions including The National Slate Museum at Llanberis and the slate landscape of Snowdonia. This formed part of their embodied approach, shaping their perspective on the unique identity and culture of the region. They recognised that the Welsh language played an important role in communicating the community's

experience as well as being an important part of their written, spoken and musical culture. This led to the foregrounding of Welsh voices in the performance and the film. They also spent time in Penrhyn Castle's archives with curatorial staff, researching material relating to The Great Strike. Both the painting of Penrhyn Slate Quarry and archival photographs informed the design of the inflatable sculpture.

Consultation with the community was key to the development of the performance, and relationships with the poet Rhys Trimble and other locally-based artists were particularly important to the process. Also the relationship with Penrhyn Choir was fundamental to integrating the project in the local community. In addition, Walker & Bromwich held 'Meet the artists' surgeries at the local arts and community centre, attended events in Bethesda to meet other community interest groups, and arranged meetings with staff and students at local schools and colleges.



Left: Quarry and Banner Making Workshops with local volunteers
Right: Rehearsals with the Penrhyn Choir March April 2017

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate
or Slate*

Although there had been earlier examples of participatory art projects commissioned through Trust New Art, this was the first to feature a performance co-produced with the community for whom the process was more significant than the physical outputs. For the National Trust and staff at Penrhyn Castle, this entailed a degree of reputational risk with peer organisations, existing audiences and the community itself if it fell short of its objectives or handled the subject-matter of The Great Strike without the required sensitivity.

The risk was similar for Walker & Bromwich, working with the National Trust for the first time as part of a high-profile programme, perhaps enhanced by their status as English artists working with a Welsh community. While their inability to speak Welsh was a practical issue easily circumvented, their status as “outsiders” required careful negotiation with some members of the community. However, it also afforded them an impartial viewpoint that benefitted their enquiry and enabled them to distance themselves from long-held divisions in the community with regard to the strike and its legacy.

During the period of Walker & Bromwich’s residency, the National Trust prioritised the ‘emotional impact’ of their programme, using comments cards as well as other visitor feedback to measure their success. Creating an emotional connection with properties was felt to be a key way of engaging and maintaining visitor interest, with projects commissioned through Trust New Art seen to be particularly effective. Subsequently, they have commissioned a writer to work with them on revealing the Pennant Family’s links to the international slave trade as part of their ongoing investigation of their “difficult heritage”. (Macdonald 2009)

For the community, the performance became an opportunity to re-inscribe this dark period of their history, not through re-enactment since the striking quarrymen were not able to deliver their demands to the Castle, but by reimagining a more positive ending to the strike. It reinforced their shared identity which, anecdotally, helped heal some of the the rifts in the community. Walker & Bromwich donated the artworks and a copy of the film to Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Secondary School as educational tools to engage future generations in their heritage.



Performance: *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*, 1st July 2017, Photography: Mark Pinder, Michael Pollard
Penrhyn Choir performed before the Great Quarry Sculpture into Penrhyn Castle at the launch of *Slate or State*. This was a historic moment of bringing the Great Strike story into the heart of the castle. For many locals it was the first time they had ever gone into the castle

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*

“The legacy created by the work was a seismic shift in two main areas. The first in how the local community are starting to see the Castle now, some even starting to claim it as their place. The second is how the internal team are now freely and unreservedly talking to visitors about all aspects of the Penrhyn history. This was not the case before the introduction of ‘State or Slate’ by Walker & Bromwich.”

(Rhian Cahill, Penrhyn Castle Visitor Experience Manager, taken from ‘Beyond Penrhyn: Changing the way we work’, National Trust report about the legacy of *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*)

“Contemporary art has a role to play in presenting the past, helping us tackle difficult conversations, question our surroundings and express emotion by exploring stories in different ways. We hope that our visitors will find the sculpture thought-provoking as they discover more about this important part of Penrhyn’s past and its effect on the local community.”

(Nerys Jones, General Manager at Penrhyn Castle, as above)

“I have really enjoyed watching the project evolve. As I run down the mountain now, overlooking the quarry, somehow you made that really... real and touchable. Very moving.”

(Catrin Menai, local artist, taken from Community Evaluation Report)



Performance: *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*, 1st July 2017, Photography: Mark Pinder, Michael Pollard
Procession of the inflatable sculpture from Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen in Bethesda to Penrhyn Castle, Wales.

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*

Exhibition: *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State* at Penrhyn
Castle - National Trust, 1 July - 5 November 2017
Photography: Mark Pinder, Michael Pollard

Neil Bromwich (Walker & Bromwich) *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*



STAGE A: Research and consultation**August - December 2016**

Researched modes of display used by industrial museums as well as collections and archives of industrial history eg. The National Slate Museum, Llanberis.

Researched modes of display used by the National Trust as well as collections and archives held at Penrhyn Castle.

December 2016 - June 2017

Developed relationships with artists and historians based in Bethesda.

Amount from project fee allocated to pay locally-based artists to support development and delivery of project.

Community consultation carried out through 'Meet the artists' surgeries at Neuadd Ogwen Arts and Community Centre, as well as meeting community and other interest groups, staff of community-facing organisations, including staff and volunteers at Penrhyn Castle, and schools.

STAGE B: Artwork development and fabrication**March – April 2017**

Workshops held with support of locally-based artists and community participants to co-produce banners, musical chants and inflatable quarry sculpture, and talks as part of ongoing consultation process:

Côr y Penrhyn

16 meetings with 68 members of the choir and their conductors to develop and rehearse their contribution to the performance.

Côr Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Secondary School

2 workshops with 15 school choir members, choir master Hefin Evans, poet Rhys Trimble, and Côr y Penrhyn's junior conductor Caleb Rhys to develop school's musical contribution to the project. The choir developed a call-and-response chant based on the demands of The Great Strike to perform on the day of the live event and as part of the film.

Coleg Menai, Bangor

1-hour talk to 15 art students to engage them in the project.

Consultations with coffee morning group, Café Brennan, Bethesda

4 coffee mornings with the older community in Bethesda, engaging them with the project and recording their input as oral histories. One participant contributed a list of all the accidents that had been recorded in Penrhyn Quarry.

Talks given at arts events to recruit locally based artists

Mike Murry's workshop at Galeri Caernarfon; workshops at Pontio, arts centre at University of Bangor; art events at Neuadd Ogwen, Bethesda; artist group CARN, Caernarfon.

Neuadd Ogwen Arts Centre

With input of Dilwyn Llwyd, Director of Neuadd Ogwen, the arts centre and community centre in Bethesda as part of community engagement strategy:

'Meet the artists' opening event; canvassing and publicising workshops at the monthly Sunday market; 1 x poetry, 2 x banner-making and 3 x sculpture-making workshops.

STAGE C: Film production**June 2017**

Walker & Bromwich's relationship with Peter Telfer of Culture Colony Vision was integral as co-author of the film *Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State*, as a Welsh language translator, interview consultant and filmmaker. During the filming process Walker & Bromwich with Telfer conducted vox-pop interviews with members of the public on the streets of Bethesda, in addition to the content filmed during the community consultations and workshops. Seven local people were interviewed who held connections to the quarry, the strike and the history of Bethesda, which provided the narration.

Penrhyn Choir were filmed carrying the inflatable sculpture of Penrhyn Quarry through the streets of Bethesda, and then this was repeated with young people from the community and Coleg Menai in Bangor.

STAGE D: Performances And Installation

July 2017

Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State (event)

Starting at Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Secondary School, Bethesda with a screening of the film and a performance by the school choir of the call-and-response chant, the banners and inflatable sculpture were processed through the streets of Bethesda led by Rhys Trimble. Once at the gates of Penrhyn Castle, Penrhyn Choir performed Welsh songs connected to The Great Strike to an audience of 200 local people and visitors before taking the sculpture inside to be installed in the Grand Hall with further songs performed by the Choir.

1 July - 5 November 2017

LLechi a LLafur / Slate or State (exhibition), Penrhyn Castle

The exhibition consisted of the inflatable sculpture of Penrhyn Slate Quarry installed in the Grand Hall at the centre of Penrhyn Castle with the film screened on a loop in a nearby room. The exhibition was accompanied with information text

panels and a leaflet giving an overview of the project and its historical context, and a feedback board where visitors could leave their comments. The exhibition was also supported by the Castle's volunteer front-of-house team who gave introductions to visitors as they entered the Castle.

6 November 2017

Closing event at Neuadd Ogwen Arts and Community Centre

Penrhyn Choir hosted a closing event at the arts centre in Bethesda on the day following the closure of the exhibition at Penrhyn Castle, to which all participants including National Trust staff were invited. This included a performance of some of the songs featured in the project as well as a final screening of the film.

Musicians

Côr y Penrhyn (Penrhyn Male Voice Choir), 68 members
Alun Davies, Chair
Owain Arwel Davies, Musical Director
Caleb Rhys, Junior Conductor

Artists

Rebecca Hardy-Griffiths, community workshops & recruitment
Alys Jones
Helen Jones
Catrin Menai
Mike Murry
Rhys Trimble, poet
Emrys Williams
Alan Whitfield

Filmmakers

Pete Telfer, Culture Colony Vision
Ffion Williams, film & live event producer

Historians

Elwin Hughes
Brenda Wyn-Jones

Project administration

Hannah Cook
Mike Davies
Jane Griffiths
Claire Holmes

Partner organisations

Ysgol Dyffryn Ogwen Secondary School, choir
master Hefin Evans
Neuadd Ogwen Arts and Community Centre, director
Dilwyn Llwyd
Coleg Menai, Bangor
Café Brennan, Bethesda

National Trust Penrhyn Castle

Nerys Jones, General Manager
Rhian Cahill, Visitor Experience Manager

National Trust

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle/features/slate-or-state-by-walker-and-bromwich>

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/penrhyn-castle/projects/beyond-penrhyn-changing-the-way-we-work>

Press and publicity

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-west-wales-39532667>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-west-wales-40459489>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-wales-south-west-wales-40469502/inflatable-sculpture-carried-to-penrhyn-castle-in-procession>

<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/pictures-walker-bromwichs-slate-state-penrhyn-castle/>

<https://geotopoi.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/slate-or-state-penrhyn-castle/>

<https://www.culturecolony.com/media/video/llechi-llafur-slate-or-state>



Llechi A Llafur / Slate or State, Exhibition, at Penrhyn Castle - National Trust 1 July - 5 November 2017