

Capel Celyn

Christopher Collier

This piece was played as part of the Wet Sounds tour (London, Brighton, Bath, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Carlisle, Edinburgh, Nairn, 2008) of underwater sound installations and formed the central focus, again played underwater, of the installation Capel Celyn (Liverpool, 2008). This particular sound installation toured ten venues across the UK from London to Edinburgh.

The work dealt with the controversial flooding of the village of Capel Celyn in North Wales and the destruction of this community in order to provide drinking water for Liverpool. The village became an iconic rallying point for many causes including the campaigns for the Welsh language, meaningful Welsh political representation and the struggle of marginalised, rural communities against the encroachment of urban cultural and economic influence. The piece features abstract electronic tones, bells sampled from Welsh chapels similar to the one that was destroyed in the flooding of the village, along with speeches from the politician Gwynfor Evans who recognised the iconic potential of this event and campaigned hard against the flooding. His speeches are here condensed into indecipherable blasts of sound, examining ideas of language, interpretation and the problematic nature of communication. The piece concludes with a reworked sample of the original 1899 recording of the Welsh National Anthem that is, whilst still recognisable, through use of altered tempo and reverb distorted into a mournful and haunting lament.

In exploring the issues surrounding the flooding of the village of Capel Celyn in order to provide water for Liverpool, the work questions our relationship to water as an economic commodity in the control of external authorities, be that Liverpool City Council or privatised water companies. It is symbolic of the often overlooked demands that urbanisation makes upon communities (be they rural communities in the British Isles or in the developing world) and the inherent exploitation of resources that accompanies this. The tone of the work seeks to evoke a sense of loss, of ghostly deserted buildings beneath the water, the of the lament of a lost community and the end of a way of life. The work achieved its true power when played in the swimming pool at Liverpool, beneath waters that had once likely swam around the ruins of Capel Celyn itself. A solemn reminder amidst all the self-congratulation in the city during it's year as European Capital of Culture of one culture destroyed as another bathes in the limelight. It is a legacy of cultural imperialism that with its place at the heart of the British Empire, its history of Irish refugees and its own suffering under Thatcher's Kulturkampf that Liverpool of all places should not forget.