Searching for the Perfect Welsh Mountain

A performance of tactical absurdity

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> I had an easy climb among the streams, about the fragments of Rocks, and should have got, I think, to the summit, but unfortunately I was damped by slipping one leg into a squashy hole.
> John Keats, *Letter to his brother Tom*, 1818 (2002: 139)

> Finally, that's more like it – a proper mountain. I think this is what I'm looking for. It's big, it's remote, it's got a lake in front of it, there's some cloud at the top of it … *[looks back towards camera]*. It's not making me think about Wales though. It's not making me think about anything.
> *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* (Ball 2016)

The weather was exactly as forecast: grey and wet. The evening before I'd noticed that I'd brought the wrong power adapter with me on my trip to Snowdonia, which meant I wouldn't be able to charge my camera or use my laptop. I'd spent a stressful few hours trying to come up with a solution to the problem; at 1.30 a.m. the idea had come to me that I could use the hostel's DVD player cable to power the camera, so all was not lost, though this still left me without a computer for a week, which wasn't ideal. So in the morning I'd decided to head by train to Llanrwst, a market town with a population of 3,000, to find an adapter in a hardware shop that I hoped was still there after seeing it advertised in the hostel's five-year-old copy of the Yellow Pages. Remarkably, within three minutes of getting off the train, I'd found the shop and found exactly the adapter I needed. This was great, all the more so for being so straightforward. Suddenly I had the whole day ahead of me to focus on hills.

By early afternoon I'd begun my journey up the winding Pyg Track ascent of Snowdon. The sun was finally bursting through the clouds, and the scenery looked stunning – almost too stunning, in fact. It was a relentless onslaught of beauty that seemed to have jumped straight out of the heavily Photoshopped pages of a Visit Wales marketing brochure. Turning another bend, Glaslyn, the higher of the two lakes enclosed within the Snowdon Horseshoe, opened up before me, and that too struck me as too-good-to-be-true. 'Yes, this really is an amazing mountain range', I conceded; I could see now why it was so famous, and so often photographed, painted, written about – and why so many tourists flocked here. I was, however, continually plagued by the nagging doubt that it somehow wasn't real, that I was just looking at a reproduction. I turned back hesitantly towards the video camera I'd set up on a tripod and remembered I was trying to look like I was being moved by my surroundings. But it was no use: my expression couldn't conceal my scepticism and indifference. There I was, standing before the most iconic mountain in Wales – and feeling nothing.

Searching for the Welsh Landscape was a project developed for a solo exhibition at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in 2016–17 that set out to explore the problematic notion that national identity subsists in the landscape of a particular region. Its origins lay in a three-month artist's residency undertaken at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in 2014, which was the first time I had spent any significant amount of time in Wales since my childhood (I was born and grew up in a village in the Swansea Valley). Those initial first-hand encounters with the landscape – and, in particular, the hills – that took place during the residency triggered an engagement with a set of concerns including the relationship between representational conventions and narratives of national identity, the appropriateness or otherwise of those conventions in accounting for first-hand encounters with landscape, and my own conflicted sense of belonging on returning to the landscape of my youth. A subsequent production grant from the Arts Council of Wales supported the development of the project through an extended series of visits to different parts of Wales, which ultimately led to the production of

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a body of work in video, performance, drawing, text and sculpture. In the context of my research into the use of 'tactical absurdity' in critical (fine) art practice (forthcoming 2020), the project became a test case for an absurd handling of a non-absurd subject matter. The following article will describe in detail the works that make up the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project, focusing in particular on their tactically absurd modes of operation, whose functionality, as will become apparent, relies entirely on the presence of a given context of mountain culture. Through a sustained attention to the project's (unconventional) means of engaging with that culture, the article will sketch out a position that defines itself in opposition to a 'seriousness' that is understood to be the normative mode of engagement with mountains and landscape more generally. Tactical absurdity, through its reliance on nonsensical and as-yet-unaccountable meanings and forms, will be posited as an alternative approach that is not only critical of clichéd and overly generic forms of representation, but also creates conditions in which new articulations of experience are able to arise that bear closer witness to actual lived encounters with mountains.

> This was really heavy, intense rain. So, yeah, I got pretty wet. Um, but, er, I was kind of imagining, you know, just describing what had happened on this little hillside, and saying things like, 'I've never seen rain like this in my life!' But, of course, that's not true, because it rains like this all the time in Wales, and this happened every second day for, like, my entire childhood.
> *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* (Ball 2014–16)

Early on during the initial residency a working process was established based on undertaking day-long walks around the countryside surrounding Aberystwyth. These walks were understood as performative in the sense that they were executed less as a means of amassing material according to some predetermined artistic need, than as a generative tool that would shape the form of the project itself, and, in a certain sense, *become* its form. What quickly became apparent during the walks was that what was colouring my experience of the landscape was a sense of 'attachment' I felt towards it; I was, moreover, becoming increasingly preoccupied with the hills, and had spontaneously begun a process of weighing up particular hills in terms of how 'Welsh' they were. Later on in the project I was able to identify two main influences on these judgements: firstly, my own memories of my childhood home, where, upon opening the curtains each morning, I was confronted by the sight of the steep glacially carved slopes of the hill across the valley (which has to this day remained the yardstick by which I judge all other mountains); and secondly, the cumulative process by which certain landforms have become indexes of 'Welshness' through their appropriation within particular narratives of national identity (witness, for example, the travel writer HV Morton's verdict in 1932 that the Llanberis Pass in Snowdonia 'gathers into it all the loneliness, all the sadness, all the brooding melancholy which are at the heart of Celtic countries. It might be in Ireland. It might be in Scotland: it could never be in England' (qtd in Gruffudd et al. 2000: 597)). What emerged as a fleeting, speculative and somewhat spurious means of framing my unfolding experience of the Welsh landscape (based on a highly subjective and culturally arbitrary set of associations) was formalized as an intentionally absurd search for a 'perfect, archetypal Welsh hill'. Despite the fact that I at no stage believed that such a thing as a perfect Welsh hill existed, the search was carried out in a spirit of diligent and exhaustive sincerity. This exercise in apparent futility became the guiding principle behind the series of over thirty walks I took around five hilly regions in Wales, which ultimately found form in the sixty hill-drawings and texts that make up *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* (2014–16).

The lineage of such an approach to art making can be traced back to 1960s and 1970s instructional-based conceptual art. These include celebrated works such as Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), in which the artist carried out his own directive to 'follow a different person every day … until that person enters a private place', and Sol LeWitt's *Wall Drawing 46* (1970), a work that shifts the attention from the drawing itself (which is executed by assistants) to the organizing principle behind it (the instruction,

'vertical lines, not straight, not touching, covering the wall evenly'). Both point towards a model of practice in which, as LeWitt himself famously put it, the 'idea becomes a machine that makes the art' (1967: 214). What *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* shares with these works is its deployment of a clearly defined premise that governs the activity that follows: in this case, the 'instruction' to go out and find the perfect Welsh mountain. The tone of the work, however, appears to have little in common with such early exercises in conceptual austerity, whose own qualities of playfulness, levity and latent absurdity are easily overlooked. As curator Kelly Baum points out in an essay for a recent exhibition that posits 'delirium' as one of the 'defining experiences' for artists in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (2017: 19), LeWitt's work in particular suffers from a popular mischaracterization that it is 'rationalism made manifest' (21). On closer inspection, however, there is little in the work to support such an assertion; by the end of the seventies Rosalind Krauss was already drawing attention to the 'mad obstinacy' at work in his *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* (1974), which presents 122 variants of a cube made from between three and twelve segments that 'sit in regimented but meaningless lines' (Krauss 1978: 54). It was, in her view, an embodiment of an 'obsessional's unwavering ritual, with its precision, its neatness, its finicky exactitude, covering over an abyss of irrationality' (56) – its deployment of 'logic', moreover, suggesting the 'spinning gears of a machine disconnected from reason' (57).

If the act of walking through the Welsh landscape in search of a non-existent 'perfect, archetypal Welsh hill' appears equally unreasonable in its degree of futility and foolhardiness, then that is precisely its point. Emma Cocker (2010) takes up the theme in her essay 'Over and over, again and again', focusing on examples of artistic practice that 'play out according to a model of purposeless reiteration, through a … relentless obligation to a rule or order that seems absurd, arbitrary, or somehow undeclared' (265). The performance of absurdity is characterized in such cases through 'a sense of ambivalence or indifference', which makes it 'possible to imagine the Sisyphean task inhabited, if only momentarily, as a site of humour, ridiculousness, or … even joy or happiness' (272). Far from an activity of an alienated subject locked into a hopeless pursuit of existential meaning, the Sisyphean search for a perfect Welsh hill becomes positive, deliberately irrational in its conception, yet ultimately still productive in its adherence to its own arbitrarily defined rule. The performance of a deliberately absurd act, moreover, brings into being a 'critical inconsistency', which, for Cocker, represents a 'shifting of position between investment and indifference, seriousness and non-seriousness, gravity and levity' (*272*). In the case of *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*, traces of a critical attitude towards the notion that national identity subsists within a landscape can indeed be discerned, yet the legibility and coherence of that critique are continually undermined by the absurdity of the work's own conceptual premise.

> So I walked up to the top of the hill, and on the top of the hill there were no sheep, but a pack of horses – about thirty of them – which, er, was quite unexpected. And I spent a long time, um, kind of following the horses around, photographing them, even though I have no interest whatsoever in horses. *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* (Ball 2014–16)

To throw into relief the illogical and contradictory nature of its underlying premise, the search adopted various tropes of recreational hill-walking beloved of so-called 'hill-baggers', including the earnest and meticulous attention paid to summit elevations, grid references, times and dates of 'conquest' and, using a vernacular borrowed from mountaineering proper, the particular 'face' climbed. All of this data is integrated into the drawings of the hills (fig. 1), despite the fact that in many cases the 'mountains' in question are little more than hillocks, and were not necessarily 'summited' at all, merely viewed in passing. The drawings themselves are executed in identical format and style: soberly naturalistic renderings based on photographs, reminiscent of the illustrations found in well-known walkers' guides such as John and Anne Nuttall's *The Mountains of England and Wales* (2008–9) or Alfred Wainwright's *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells* (2005–9). What pulls against this inhabitation of a familiar – and

manifestly *serious* – form of engagement with hills and mountains, however, are the museum-style wall-texts that accompany the drawings, which draw attention to the unconventional and erratic nature of the walks themselves (see excerpts above). Although sites of recognized appeal were visited during the walks, the focus tended to be on the ordinary and unspectacular; routes were subject to spontaneous changes of plan, and failures to climb targeted hills due to inclement weather or navigational error were considered valuable outcomes. Accordingly, the texts, which are extremely literal transcriptions of my own verbal recollections of the process of walking, convey fluctuations in my own state of mind, relate banal and fragmentary anecdotes, humorous incidents or moments of physical discomfort, and stutteringly and inarticulately attempt to describe the landscape and reflect upon the search itself. Such a diversity of experience clearly exceeds the limits of conventional accounts of encounters with hills and mountains, which for the most part focus on weightier or more heartfelt concerns such as natural beauty or sublimity, personal goals or challenges, cultural, environmental or psychological resonances, or the pleasure taken in the act of walking itself.

Through its simultaneous inhabitation and violation of norms of engagement with mountains and the means by which they are accounted for, *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales* stages a jarring juxtaposition that deliberately (tactically) brings in elements that sit disharmoniously within an established context. The term 'absurd', considered etymologically via its Latin root *absurdus* (out of tune, discordant), resonates precisely with this figure of an incongruity arising when a given norm is violated. Indeed, it is this characteristic 'inharmonious' quality (Gavins 2013: 1) that defines the concept of absurdity far more satisfactorily than any attempt to align it with an intrinsic and stable lack, for as soon as its antithesis is sought (the *rational* to its irrational, the *logical* to its illogical, the *meaningful* to its meaningless, the *sense* to its nonsense), the concept evaporates into a fog of relativist uncertainty. Susan Stewart, in her masterly monograph on nonsense, stressed that sense making is a dynamic activity that

Figure 1. Dave Ball, drawing from *The Mountains of Wales are the Mountains of Wales*; series of sixty drawings and texts, pencil on paper, each 420 × 297 mm. *Courtesy of the artist*

continually *produces* the sense that it strives for: 'Principles of sense and rationality', as she put it, 'are ongoing accomplishments of social life' (1978: 8). Moreover, she argued, highlighting the necessary interdependence of sense and nonsense, 'acts of common sense will shape acts of nonsense and acts of nonsense will shape acts of common sense' (vii). Far better, then, to define absurdity dynamically, as *that which is out of harmony with a given context*. The apprehension of absurdity can thus be seen to stem from an irresolvable discord at the level of understanding: a tension between an anticipated meaning and a consequent meaninglessness.

■

Context, then, is critical. And the more saturated a given context is with meanings, the more effective absurdity becomes as a tactical device for exploding those layers of code, convention and habit that have ossified into its interpretative framework. A second work in the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project, the video *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* (2016), wades directly into such overcrowded and overdetermined waters. The work is made up of a series of carefully composed scenes of often spectacular landscape shot over a five-day period in Snowdonia (fig. 2); in each I (as the eponymous artist) can be seen walking into the picture and adopting a stance reminiscent of the protagonist in Caspar David Friedrich's much reproduced 1818 painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (hailed by Robert

Macfarlane as the 'archetypal image of the mountain-climbing visionary' (2003: 157)). Accompanying the imagery is a stream-of-consciousness-style voice-over soundtrack, which, although scripted, recorded and edited for the video, was based on genuine trains of thought that had occurred during the walks. At times appreciative and engaged – in accordance with a narrative of mountain exploration that, in Macfarlane's view, having become an 'orthodoxy' by the mid-eighteenth century, 'continues to hold sway today' (149) – more often than not the thoughts become distracted or unconvinced, betraying a capriciousness and lack of interest in what is at hand, and frequently drifting off into entirely different realms of experience.

If, as convention dictates, the 'mountain-top and the viewpoint' are 'sites of contemplation and creativity' that allow the explorer to 'see further both physically and metaphysically', then any artist exposed to a mountain would presumably hope to experience some kind of an 'epiphany' (159–60). Crucially, however, if and when that epiphany does occur, it does so within a broader spectrum of other, banal and everyday mental activity, which is largely left out of the orthodox narrative. A point of departure for *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* is an acknowledgement that to stand at the foot of a mountain in Snowdonia and gaze up at its summit is to see it through an accumulative lens of centuries of representations. The mountains encountered, that is, are already bound up within some narrative; they have already been made meaningful, whether culturally, politically, scientifically or recreationally. Yet the complexity of actual lived encounters with mountains is never fully accounted for by any of those constraining narratives and modes of representation.

> *[A person walks past; then another]*. God, there's so many people here *[a third person walks past]*. This is ridiculous … I just want a gap so I can go and sit there alone – or look like I'm alone, anyway. *[A fourth person walks past]*. Right, now's my chance *[sits down, looking from side to side throughout]*. Christ, it's a long way down there … I've got to try and look calm – pretend I'm immersed in the sublime scene in front of me. I'm far too close to the edge though to think about the sublime … *[gets up and leaves]*.
> *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* (Ball 2016)

If the intention of the work is to undermine the clichéd conventionality of the representational forms it appropriates through the absurd clash of different registers of meaning it performs, then that operation bears more than a passing resemblance to the mechanism of a verbal joke. Paolo Virno (2008), arguing for the transformative power of wordplay in an essay 'Jokes and innovative action: for a logic of change', posits that jokes simultaneously draw upon and subvert linguistic customs, thus highlighting the function of those customs as implicit presuppositions that

Figure 2. Dave Ball, still from *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany*; video, 20 mins. *Courtesy of the artist*

underpin the sense-making systems of a given community. The representational context of *An Artist in Search of an Epiphany* correlates precisely with the kind of orthodoxy that, in Virno's view, supports, delimits and even makes possible a given discourse. Embedded in a whole host of cultural forms, conventional discourse – or the 'grammar of a form of life' – is understood to have become sufficiently naturalized as to require the disruptive mechanism of humour to un-embed it, and to render it un-reasonable (94). The joke's 'point of honour', he continues, 'lies in illustrating the questionable nature of the opinions lying beneath discourses and actions. In order to hit its target, the joke pushes one single belief to the limit, to the point of extracting absurd and ridiculous consequences from it' (94). By tactically undermining the consensually stabilized meaning of a representation of an artist within a sublime landscape through the incongruous addition of an unorthodox voice-over, the work, via the 'oblique path' that it opens up, performs precisely such a critical manoeuvre (94); the 'grammar' with which it speaks is problematized, its sense displaced and mutated.

A third, and less obviously critical, work in the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* series is the video-performance *Hill Walking* (2015) (fig. 3). Presented as a video-diary, the work charts my attempt to climb one of the highest peaks in the Brecon Beacons National Park, Fan-y-Big, without looking at the mountain itself. The origins of the work are banally contingent: a lack of Sunday bus services to the area I had been intending to survey meant that I was left on that particular day with no alternative but to walk in the 'wrong' area (which was conveniently close to my accommodation in Brecon). I had, accordingly, decided to spend the day recording ambient sounds in the hilly uplands nearby rather than working visually, which had been my usual focus. As the walk got underway, however, the visual beauty of the national park became more and more pronounced, and I began to experience my self-imposed ban on looking as increasingly absurd. The act of earnestly trying not to look at the often breathtaking surroundings proved compellingly incongruous enough to formalize as a conceptual premise for a performative work. Recorded intermittently as I approached and then ascended the hill, the video-diary documents various strategies including walking backwards so as not to face the mountain ahead; looking at the floor as I walk; blocking the view ahead of me with a map; and, finally, in a denouement of sorts at the summit, closing my eyes. The work thus unfolds in accordance with the logic of a defining premise in which I (as the performer) carry out an instruction to 'walk to the top of a hill without looking at it'. The directive is absurd; it enforces – for no apparent reason – a denial of the visual pleasures ordinarily associated with hill-walking. Yet the work's absurdity goes beyond this, stemming also from the way it is performed: my flippant, ambivalent and frequently ironic demeanour suggesting that I was neither taking the premise entirely seriously, nor was confident of being able to implement it with any degree of success. Accordingly, the mountain backdrop I am ostensibly trying to avoid looking at remains continuously and overwhelmingly present and visible throughout the video.

Figure 3. Dave Ball, still from *Hill Walking;* video-performance, 13 mins. *Courtesy of the artist*

Such an absurdly conceived and performed activity would at first sight appear to serve no useful function at all in addressing the critical question posed by the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project of whether one's sense of national identity can be said to subsist within the landscape; it neither articulates a straightforwardly intelligible response nor engages with the topic in any conventionally discursive sense. Not only does *Hill Walking*

initiate a failure in the act of hill-walking itself (by comically eliminating one of its defining features), but it also appears to fail under its own terms, successful neither in carrying out its own directive (of not looking at the hill), nor in delivering its promised criticality. Returning to Cocker's Sisyphean model of artistic practice, however, it is possible to turn this apparent failure on its head, and rethink it as a 'generative or productive force' (2010: 266). Forwarding a notion of 'non-teleological performativity' (265), Cocker points to the work of Francis Alÿs, wherein 'a single protagonist often appears locked into a process of protracted action that invariably fails to produce any sense of measurable outcome' (281). When Alÿs, in his *Paradox of Praxis I (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing)* (1997), pushes a large block of ice around the streets of Mexico City for nine hours until it has completely melted away, he is taking an exhaustive stand against what he has described as the 'pressure of being productive' (qtd in Cocker 2010: 282). Since failure is, by definition, constituted inversely – according to a set of 'habitually unspoken and yet tacitly enforced values, expectations and criteria for success' (Cocker 2010: 283) – we are left wondering what kind of 'outcome' or what model of 'productivity' the work is actually failing to achieve. The deliberate absurdity of Alÿs' act, far from a turning away from criticality, begins to resemble a productive and (indirectly) critical form of praxis. As the artist himself puts it:

> Through the gratuity or the absurdity of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurdity of the situation and, through this act of transgression, makes you step back or step out and revise your prior assumptions about this reality. (Alÿs 2010: 39)

Tactically absurd performance, in its violation of conventional frameworks of meaning, is necessarily indeterminate in its relation to pre-existing discourse; it is not surprising, therefore, that it is frequently overlooked as a legitimate form of engaged practice. However, approached with an attitude of openness towards emergent forms of meaning that have not yet been domesticated, legitimized or tied down to sense, the critical potential of absurd performance – together with its capacity for productivity and innovation – becomes apparent.

Here, then, lie the ultimate grounds for the absurdly comic approach adopted by the *Searching for the Welsh Landscape* project. For while it may seem reasonable to favour a weighty or earnest seriousness in our engagements with mountains, this assumption stems, at least in part, from our tendency to perceive its opposite – the non-serious – as, to borrow Virno's term, 'insufficient' (2008: 97). We distrust it, that is, because we lack the established structures of understanding necessary to account for its sense. Embarking on a two-year-long search for a non-existent perfect Welsh mountain, staging a series of mock-epiphanic encounters with sublime scenery that lead only to distraction and boredom, climbing to the summit of a hill without looking at it: these are all activities that – at first sight – make no 'sense' according to any conventionally understood ways of engaging with mountains. Yet, framed as instances of a critical performative artistic practice, these apparently senseless acts begin to take on a different, fertile character.

Tactical absurdity, as we have seen, is set in motion when a manifestly meaningless act is performed within a context; as soon as the meaninglessness of that act is registered, however, our interpretative faculties invariably step in and seek to fill the void. New connections within the context are forged, and new meanings are able to take shape. Normative attitudes underpinning the practice of hill-walking are thus called into question, having been displaced by speculative and unorthodox alternatives (Why must I always adopt an appreciative frame of mind when I'm walking up hills? Why is looking so important? Why does getting lost constitute a failure? Why is a summit of 3,000 feet so much more sought-after than one a few feet lower? What's so special about the tops of hills? Why do I have to say 'hello' to everyone I pass?). Clearly, every hill-walker sets off with their own individual set of motivations and degrees of conformity to the norms of their activity, but an underlying arbitrariness is never far away, memorably witnessed in George Mallory's apocryphal justification for wanting to climb Everest simply 'because it's there' (qtd in Macfarlane 2003: 272).

Conventions of representation, too, begin to appear unnecessarily one-dimensional, their relentlessly weighty seriousness infused with an inherited visual and textual culture of mountains that still clings to a romantic mystique, with little regard for the trivial, the incidental or the funny. Which one of us is able to hold an iPhone up to Snowdon and take a photograph that is truly our own vision of what we *actually* witnessed when we were there, and not what we have been conditioned to expect? Why do we feel compelled to recount our experiences of mountains through narratives of majestic views and personal epiphanies? What about that time I saw a slug in the pouring rain by a roadside in the Berwyn Mountains and reflected on how happy it looked? Why was that less important than the (equally memorable) vision of the soaring green valleys of my homeland that I saw another day from a hilltop? Why, in other words, does so much of our experience get left out in conventional representations? And why are we so ready to overlook Keats' all-too-familiar mishap (related in the epigraph above) of falling into a bog one aborted afternoon in the Lake District during one of his journeys into the heavens of his romantic imagination? Perhaps we need to remind ourselves that mountains, as the poet no doubt reflected on his long, soggy trek back down the hillside, sometimes – just sometimes – display their own sense of the ridiculous.

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