

In October 2005, Channel 4 announced the start of its Big Art Project. It wanted communities across the UK to compete for the chance to choose and create a piece of large-scale public art for a designated site. There would be seven winners, each of which would have to raise the funds to pay for a part of their chosen work. The emphasis from the start was on community involvement, but C4's website also states: 'It's a first from Channel 4: an opportunity for the public to be at the centre of a unique initiative right where they are living and become a central character in a prime-time television series.' In other words, 'we'll make you famous'. The winning sites and locations were Burnley; the abandoned Sutton Manor colliery, St. Helens; Cooling Towers, Sheffield, the Isle of Mull, Beckton Alp in Newham, East London; Waterworks Park in North Belfast and Prince Charles Quay, Cardigan. The results so far as they are known (at the time of writing several steering groups had not made a final choice) include some very different solutions to very different problems: Burnley went for a collection of 19 paintings that can only be seen with an ultraviolet light source and made by a member of the collective, greyworld, in association with 15 local teenagers. St. Helens has commissioned a 20-metre sculpture of a child's head by Jaume Plensa to stand at the top of an abandoned colliery, and Sheffield's steering group hoped to save the 76-metre high Tinsley cooling towers. Sheffield Council wants to demolish the towers to make way for a £60 million bio-mass power station, the owners of which have offered to buy the city an alternative piece of art somewhere else. Sheffield's Big Art project has become controversial because of a fight over the possible loss of two pieces of industrial archaeology; the historic town of Cardigan (home of the Eisteddfod and a castle in the throes of restoration) is facing a battle over whether or not the artist, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, should be allowed to float 127 translucent plastic buoys on its river. The idea is that the buoys will be tied together under the waterline and anchored by a wreck. Each buoy will be fitted with recording equipment and LED lights so that passers-by can record messages through a row of microphones standing on the quay. The recordings will be played back – and the LEDs flash – when the water becomes choppy – hence the installation's name of Turbulence. While the project's promoter, Jim Evans,

claims that the majority of Cardigan's citizens want Turbulence to go ahead, the selection process has already been marred by accusations of fixing and there are those who claim that the community has not been involved enough in the choice of Lozano-Hemmer's work. The opposition is led by Ralph Rea who says he's collected 3,500 signatures against having the buoys in the river (Cardigan's total population amounts to 4,200). Cardigan's (or is it C4's?) Big Art idea hangs in the balance while the county planning committee makes its decision. Even those who aren't too pleased with Turbulence say that it is essential because it will focus attention on the 'quiet' little town (on a Saturday night Cardigan can be anything but!), helping to increase revenue from tourism. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is famous for having created the world's largest installation, **which played iwth light beams** and his communications with Cardigan have been gentle, loving and sweet.

Apart from the financial (the money could be better spent elsewhere), sound pollution/moral (the buoys will encourage swearing and keep people awake at night), and the aesthetic aspects (why weren't local artists given a chance – they were; who wants a load of plastic rubbish on our river), one of the strongest arguments against the buoys is that they will have a disastrous effect on the riverine ecology. The Teifi is a Site of Special Scientific Interest from source to estuary mouth. They say that no-one has studied the effect of having 127 buoys on a tidal stream which flows in and out twice a day, or taken on board that in summer at low tide the river becomes so small that it leaves boats floundering on its mudflats. They maintain that the obstruction will prevent salmon, lamprey, seals and porpoises from swimming upstream. The promoters of Turbulence have commissioned a report by APEM, a firm of aquatic scientists, which purports to answer all the nature lovers' objections. But the environmentalists are not satisfied that APEM have been thorough enough. Sadly but predictably this has also become a struggle between people who see themselves as progressive and those they describe as fuddy-duddies who 'won't believe anything until they see it'. The insults have been flying so rapidly that one of our older installation artists, Michael Turner, who lives in Ceredigion but is better known in Germany than Britain, complained to the newspapers about the depths to which the debate's language had sunk (no

puns intended). He didn't mention whether he was for or against the project, though. It seems to me that the environmental argument is a strong one. The true practicalities of this engaging idea haven't been worked out properly. People holiday in Ceredigion because it's quiet, beautiful and it's far from polluted cities. They want to feel as though they're in an environment teeming with wildlife, 'natural goodness' - use any old cliché you like. I can almost hear the sonorous voices of the Preseli farmers who saved their mountains from becoming an army training ground in 1948, when told that having soldiers around would bring money into the area: 'Are we going to choose Mammon or God?' I understand that some compromises have been agreed already and that if it gets the go-ahead, Turbulence will be sited slightly further up river, not beside the Prince Charles Quay, and that it will not be permanent. And wouldn't restoring a medieval fish trap be a grand, big old eccentric project full of local interest - as long as it didn't catch any fish, that is!