

## Visual Arts on the Edge: Marginality and Regeneration

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North East Scotland is on the edge between the urban central belt of Scotland and the North Sea. This outcrop of land edged by water – the North Sea, has a rich vernacular cultural heritage that predates the more dominant culture of Scotland's densely populated 'Central Belt', which includes the cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow with their industrial and post – industrial characters. Within rural areas of Northern Scotland industries such as fishing and agriculture manifest change in a different way from urban centres. Processes of change are slower, less visible, cutting deeper into longer term memory and identities structured around a 'sense of place'. The opportunities for regeneration are fewer than in a city as a consequence of the less diverse economic and social infrastructure. It would be inappropriate to think of the arts as a tool of regeneration in these contexts in the same way as has occurred in urban post - industrial contexts. Artistic expression in remote rural areas is challenged by a different experience of the past and present, and therefore a different sense of the future.

What can be learned from these differences of experience? Can the values and tensions that underpin the life of a farmer in rural Aberdeenshire, for example, usefully inform values in contemporary art production? Can these values inform other non rural remote contexts for working in the arts? Can approaches to arts development in rural situations tell us something specific about 'interdisciplinary' and 'social' perspectives of regeneration? This paper will address these questions through a current research project in Northern Scotland, On the Edge ([www.ontheedgeresearch.org](http://www.ontheedgeresearch.org)) as a practical example of research into the visual arts and its role within cultures of change.

**The On the Edge research project tests the belief that visual arts of quality can be developed in remote rural areas by critically challenging assumptions implicit within systems of production and related systems of value of dominant urban practices.**

The research came out of unsuccessfully trying to transpose into rural situations, ways of producing art and related value systems that were predominantly urban – the three week exhibition of authored pieces, the private view, the catalogue. We made assumptions about the way that art happens with the result that we were indulging a form of arts provision that often gained critical attention in urban professional circles but which reached and involved few people at a local level. This in turn raised issues about value – Who makes and who funds art? For whom is it made, why and how? Who decides what is art of quality?

## Methodology

We are just over half way through the three - year research period. The main mechanism for delivery is a programme of five live experimental projects sited in five different locations in Northern Scotland with five different project partners that form the basis of the On the Edge network. The network has a very specific geographical focus but draws creative thinking, expertise and insights from individuals and organizations across disciplines and across *hierarchies of critical influence* that are national, regional and international.

The research has responded to rural ways of living by positioning the artist within communities of specific places with specific issues as a starting point for art production. This is different from a classic and increasingly questioned approach to a public art commission, in which authorship is prioritized over observation and responsiveness. The role of the artist working in remote rural situations can be defined (though not exclusively) as someone who helps us to interpret our relationships with where we live. Artists can engage us in a shared process of making meaning and creating value. This positioning is different from, but does not exclude the production of authored works, where these are an appropriate response to the sets of issues within each situation or 'site'.

In rural contexts people are known to each other as individuals, before what they do in terms of work or a profession. Tasks and skills tend to be exchanged within the community as a shared process of arriving at a desired result, rather than bought. In both urban and rural contexts the production of art mirrors the nature and quality of human relationships in each situation. Art in the city is more commonly produced through specialized, professionalised roles within a hierarchy that has a strong economic basis to its rituals of engagement– the artist as 'genius', the curator and the critic as 'personalities', and finally the 'audience' as an apparently homogenous body that is anonymous to the artist. Within the On the Edge research, in observing these differences, we have restructured the process of developing the artwork in remote rural situations. We have brought the artist, arts administrator and members of a community or 'audience' together to develop a shared experience through which artworks emerge. The basis of this shared experience is learning. The nature of networking and dialogue in contemporary modes of communication means that the creative process is informed by complex transactions between the 'local' and beyond, enabling specific situations to be effected by a rich diversity of influences.

The evaluation is co-ordinated between research in arts practice (Gray's School of Art) and that cultural policy (Comedia) and brings social/ economic and artistic perspectives together within the same discursive learning space. The individual projects include

- **The Field**  
**Scottish Sculpture Workshop**  
**Artist: Gavin Renwick**  
This project is concerned with rethinking marginal rural land use and ownership by people living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century planned village of Lumsden in rural Aberdeenshire, traditionally a farming community in which the last farmer to live in the village and earn a living solely from farming is retiring in June.
- **Virtual Brochures**  
**Museum of Scottish Lighthouses**  
**Artist: Paul Carter**  
This project investigates a sense of belonging and identity expressed by young people through their use of information technology in the fishing town of Fraserburgh, where fishing is in decline.
- **Town Artist**  
**Deveron Arts**  
**Artist: Lynn Millar**  
This project aims to enable the town of Huntly to see itself with 'fresh eyes' by means of an ambitious program of arts projects facilitated by a town artist, Lynn Millar in Huntly, Aberdeenshire, where agriculture is undergoing transformation.

- **Langerin'**  
**Shetland College and Shetland knitters and lace makers**  
**Artist: Susan Benn pallabs**  
This project revalues the traditional skills of knitting and lacemaking in the Shetland Isles and their place in contemporary culture. This revaluing is happening in the context of changes in the oil industry and a reduction to the Shetland Isles of European subsidy through the development of a creative laboratory under the guidance of pallabs, London.
- **Celestial Ceiling project**  
**Duff House**  
**Artists: Ingo Maurer and John McGeogh**  
This project involves two commissions that mark the loss of 16<sup>th</sup> century heritage, a painted ceiling, by two 21<sup>st</sup> century responses, one in a private space (artist Ingo Maurer) and the second in a public space as a projected ceiling ( artist John McGeogh). North East Scotland is particularly rich in heritage.

There are questions outstanding in particular in relation to what can be learned from the research beyond its specific context and experience. These questions include the following

- What might be new ways of thinking about creativity that value relationship and '**a sense of place**' as a starting point from which to move on?
- What mental images will enable us to transcend the rural/ urban dialectic towards developing ways of thinking about how we are in the world and imaging how we might be on a **regional basis**?

And finally

- How can methods, ideas and images from networking, facilitated by communication technologies, **redraw cultures of influence** across local/ global sites of activity?