

# Reclaiming the Rural

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*“There is, in truth, nothing essentially backward-looking, conservative or traditional in rural culture. There are too many innovators in too many fields, who have belonged to the country or used it as a source material for that to be a defensible position” – Francois Matarasso <sup>1</sup>*

Whilst it is not possible to agree with this assertion in its entirety, the fundamental premise here is totally correct. There needs to be a deep-rooted critical reassessment of the term ‘rural’; of the weight and consideration that we give to rural cultural output and of the prejudicial attitudes that have grown up within the sphere of contemporary art and culture that are overly quick to dismiss the ‘rural’ as provincial, amateurish and unengaged. Whilst there may be elements of rural culture that are indeed essentially traditional we should not leap to the accepted position of dismissing tradition as a reasonable or legitimate basis from which to make relevant, out-standing and critically engaged artistic practice.

I began thinking about the problems surrounding making contemporary art in rural areas in response to an AN: Artists Information Company paper entitled Country Living by Rosemary Shirley<sup>2</sup>. I saw her present her ideas at a conference in Wales in late 2008 and began to realise that there was a whole movement of artists out there beneath the radar of media or criticism who were operating with very similar concerns and ideas to those which had been developing myself. As Shirley stated, if you can collect together the myriad different practices that are going on under the umbrella of their common ‘rurality’, this genre is essentially “an underestimated, undervalued and often invisible form of practice”.<sup>3</sup> I believe this is what artists self-consciously working in this field must strive to alter.

I grew up in the countryside, surrounded by working farms, where the everyday struggle and practical down-to-earth realities went hand in hand for me with the sublime and romantic view of the land as something marvellous, even spiritual. It is and has been for sometime the critical fashion to draw stark separation between the mundane, often harsh realities of the countryside and what has been seen as the urbanised perspective of the rural environment as a panoramic spectacle for romantic enjoyment. The landscape made a stage set for excursions and a backdrop for adventures, a vista within which to repose. Indeed the term landscape itself has been criticised for its connotations, for turning the rural into an idealised commodity; a conveniently packaged entity for the enjoyment of the capitalist eye. To me this idea does not hold true, as a boy in the country I was as happy and as

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1: Francois Matarasso, On the Edge: art, culture and rural communities, pg27, [www.ontheedgeresearch.org](http://www.ontheedgeresearch.org)

2: Country Living, Rosemary Shirley, AN: The Artists Information Company, 2007.

3: Op. Cit. Shirley, pg3

thrilled as any young Wordsworth to clamber through thickets and dash across hillsides beneath epic skies very much aware of the landscape as a venue for adventure, as a glorious succession of exquisite imagery, as a sublime and indeed mystical companion. I did not idealise my environment, it was just as it was to me. When I photographed or sketched I did not make a commodity the land, the farmers were busy doing that all around me, that was their business and the everyday business of the countryside. Instead I merely took the rural at face value and for me it seemed more than enough to light the touch paper on a million mental adventures and an entirely reasonable basis for my burgeoning creativity.

Then came Art College and the steady realisation that I was not creating work that others considered quiet as natural or acceptable an output as I did. I was fighting a constant war with my tutor who considered my output too romantic, too old-fashioned and by no means edgy or engaged enough. I for my part thought much of what he considered edgy and engaged to be tired and largely devoid of anything that touched me in any meaningful way. Vacuous replays of old urban concerns, glamorised by association with fashionable galleries, colleges and of course with London. All I would ever hear was how fantastic London was, how cutting edge, how excellent everything coming out of London was but it did not move me or speak to me of any vestige of my experience of the world. London is full of people, that much is obvious, and where there are people there follows there is a market for art. As artists must survive then they must exchange their creativity, their skills or output for money therefore, goes the argument, make art for the market in London. But this art meant little to me, it was another symptom of the alienation I felt in the face of mass culture and I knew I was not alone. I started to think about what sort of art would speak to my experience and to the people I knew from the countryside where I grew up, if there was no market for this work then things would develop down very different avenues. Ideas and expressions became more strongly wedded to specific spaces but also more aware of time and the processes of change. The work became more ephemeral and transient, a process that might create an experience that would snap the viewer back to life. An experience that as they cut through the thickly built up layers of association and conditioning they were jarred into catching in a glimpse or a sideways glance, in an almost mystical way, of what Kant called 'Das Ding an Sich'<sup>4</sup>. I came to the conclusion that such work was not only valid but fundamentally necessary. It was work that was necessary not just for rural artists and communities but for society at large.

In the critical discourse that surrounds contemporary art today vast amounts of attention are directed unjustly towards urban, globalised, metropolitan culture. Whilst there is a place for that, I have come to believe that we should not and must not forget our own quietly stifled local micro-cultures that cling on, mostly in rural contexts, that give meaning and depth – roots – to our history. Intimately linked with the land; with folklore, language, biodiversity and tradition; they are all too often overlooked by those who create, commission and define 'culture'. A flashy, metropolitan showpiece can often be an empty shell, alienating and shallow. That is not to say all urban art is bad, all rural good – it is patently not. But art and cultural

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<sup>4</sup>Immanuel Kant (1781) *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example in A254/B310,P362 (Guyer and Wood), "The concept of a **noumenon**, i.e., of a thing that is not to be thought of as an object of the senses but rather as a thing in itself [...]"; But note that the terms are not used interchangeably throughout.

investigation should exist in rural areas, arising from their own particular strengths: a sense of community, the land, folklore, language and tradition. Innovation can still be just as stark, if not more so in the countryside, new ways of thinking about art need to be established that don't necessarily rely on huge audiences or the shock of the new. The country, the rural, needs a voice in contemporary culture. When one does not see one's own experiences and values represented and reflected back then one starts to question their validity. Humans cannot exist in isolation - one man on his own does not have a culture. With mass culture and media overlooking rural concerns and value systems they become undermined and eventually wither.

Joseph Beuys once claimed, in a phrase borrowed from Novalis, that "every human being is an artist"<sup>5</sup> but following on from such a statement should we ask the question: 'is everyone a farmer?' Everyone would surely have to agree that they are not, however if a man plants some vegetables in his garden then he is as much a farmer as the man on the street is an artist. Should we then consider the responsibility that both artists and farmers have to a wider society that demands their existence and has done so since earliest human history? Despite the fantastic democratisation of culture facilitated in recent years: the internet handing over the means of production to the masses and the growth in leisure time, the fact that everyone now has the opportunity to do it themselves, to create and be creative, everyone is no more an artist than everyone is a farmer. As farmers must create, nurture, struggle, depend on the whims of the market and public subsidy to survive, as they are often overlooked and undervalued by society, still they must create, sustain and conserve. It is often not a commercial decision, rather a vocational calling that defies capitalist logic. A decision that is traditional rather than modern and that sets apart those that make it from the society that demands them. Farmer or Artist, they are custodians of a culture for farmers too play a vital role in underpinning rural culture and to an extent culture at large. Without the the farmer or the artist culture would diffuse into a formless soup of mass-market and media-'democracy'. Rather than rural communities withering to a vacant state of non-culture, agriculture provides a glue, a web, a network that links and locks together the isolated hubs and pockets of rural life into an interconnecting culture. In turn the survival of this rural culture gives society at large a living, tangible link with its traditions and the roots of its mythologies. In a similar, if not identical fashion in wider society it falls to artists and imaginers to clamber and dangle like spiders about the social super-structure weaving the glittering, mirrored veil that both amuses and reflects the worker ants below. Without them we would be living in an age of 'Mediocracy'. As farmers, so artists operating in rural contexts have a responsibility to keep going and to keep a way of life going. To draw out the comparison still further, rural networks often still operate on a different set of social rules than those of wider, urban-centric society and artists, operating freely, also offer an alternative to the oligarch media information machine that spoon feeds culture down our throats. In the rural network word of mouth is valued; mobility, change and transience are symptoms of urban living; in the countryside static things are valued and trusted. You are a new-comer unless you have lived in the village at least twenty years. Now in some ways this is stale and negative but it serves to entrench cultures and communities against the vicious winds of global capitalism

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<sup>5</sup>Beuys statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art* (ICA, London, 1974), p.48.

that would not blink to shred the leaves from their cultural tree. It is a long practised defence mechanism and though it offends our urban-centric ideas of what is healthy and what a good society should be it serves to temper the flood of propaganda from the media machine with a hefty dose of mistrust. Artists can foster this mistrust both in urban and rural contexts, in the world at large. They can bemuse and confound, subvert and disrupt, jam the dog whistle signals with the beautiful and terrible. They can pull the altar cloth away from under the structures of control by opening up the people to a sublime reality that they can discover for themselves all around them, not at the bottom of their wallets. They can celebrate the surreal in the way Breton intended: art in the “absence of any control”, art where the surreal occurrence undermines and disrupts the usual channels of social control, jogs the viewer from their hypnagogic state.

If rural concerns can become a valid issue for contemporary artists, no longer shunned for the bright lights of dystopia, if artists can use their practice to highlight the predicament of small scale local farms then perhaps the comparison of artist and farmer can be extended and developed into a collaboration. I firmly believe that small scale, local farms, particularly hill farms in remote and difficult areas such as Cumbria and much of upland Wales are essential to maintain the continuity of the countryside, its landscape and traditions and in the Welsh case, language. Without it communities collapse, a way of life ends and the rich vein of rural tradition becomes stagnant and withers away. These farms are vital to the very existence of our accumulated millennia of agrarian heritage, its traditions, folklore and landscape literally thousands of years in the making. Hill farming is the custodian not just of local, rural economies, not just of food security, or landscape but of heritage and our now very tenuous link to the land that bore us and sustains us.

Just as society has grown alienated from natural systems and the land so too we have become disconnected from our own subconscious minds and instincts , via the all-encompassing virtual reality of media, computer and instant, constant gratification. Childhood is closed in on by elaborate play-machines stripping us from the beginning of our most valuable asset – imagination. Whilst infancy is under siege adults are regressed into the cotton wool cocoon of intimate state control and removed from the reality of decision by the false choices of consumerism, like rats in a lab addicted to the self-stimulation button. Occluded from ourselves only the psychic shock of the marvellous can jar us back to life. As Breton said:

"Let us not mince words: the marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful."

It is through wonder, beauty and the sublime that we can make our only free choice: refusal: refusal to capitulate, refusal to submit, refusal to serve, refusal to spend, refusal to die.

As contemporary artists can we lend this powerful and terrible weapon, the weapon of the marvellous and the beautiful to the cause of the countryside? Is it not our place to move things forward but also to conserve, protect and perpetuate? It is an issue of fundamental importance, when politicians can spend billions bailing out self-serving city bankers who produce and create nothing but the circulation of money whilst briefing the urban-centred media against ‘whinging farmers’ and the ‘conceptual bullshit’ of contemporary art. These are the very people who sustain the land on which we live and the space in which we think and they should not be

allowed to fall to the free market. As farming goes one could easily say that if it's good enough for the banks then it's good enough for rural communities but the UK government at least is constantly trying to renegotiate cuts in European agricultural subsidies. With art the situation is more complex, how can an artist be free when they must operate under the patronage of the state? The Arts Council is the answer that the system comes up with but this merely defers the problems. Only artists that fit the mould or tow the line that is desired at the time can be considered. They must 'engage' 'demonstrate need' and 'provide evidence of benefit'. I speak not as a bitter, rejected applicant, I have gained funding for my projects from the Arts Council in the past, but it is a far from perfect system that requires us to constantly scour for alternatives and other means of production, means that we can control for ourselves. As independent artists are often forced to compromise their vision in order to conform to required models, so too are small, independent farms frequently threatened with annihilation. If left to market forces small farms may be forced to amalgamate, taken over by large scale agri-business without local connections and without that continuity of tradition and heritage. Can those that question and reflect the social processes that they find around them, those artists and imaginers, simply leave aside the countryside and follow off after fashion to find their fortune in the mass marketplace of the Big Smoke? Are we living through a market led version of the Highland Clearances as small farms are forced out of business and artists like the young life blood of the countryside transfuse to swell the cities and oil the cogs of the culture machine. As small farms fold they concentrate more and more resources in the hands of fewer and fewer and as artists must leave their communities to find a cultural space in which to work that is deemed acceptable to critical discourse so they are absorbed into the urbanist machine where their exile completes their real alienation.

“Urbanism<sup>6</sup> doesn't exist; it is only an “ideology” in Marx's sense of the word. Architecture does really exist, like Coca-Cola: though coated with ideology, it is a real production, falsely satisfying a falsified need. Urbanism is comparable to the advertising about Coca-Cola — pure spectacular ideology. Modern capitalism, which organizes the reduction of all social life to a spectacle, is incapable of presenting any spectacle other than that of our own alienation. Its urbanistic dream is its masterpiece’

– Attila Kotanyi, Raoul Vaneigem<sup>7</sup>

Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem, I believe, was stating that all urban space is the domain of the enemy: an alienating spectacle of conditioning. Artists are fundamental to the disruption of this, either through a situationist exploration of psycho-geography or in the act of refusal. By making work that is self-consciously rural in inception and outlook the artist is refusing and resisting this urbanist controlled psychological and cultural space. This is where sustainable rural communities can play their part also, they can offer an alternative to what Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem described as “spacious and brightly coloured kindergartens”. They can be spaces less permeated by the forces of spatial and

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<sup>6</sup>The French word *urbanisme* usually means “city planning,” but it also refers to the general policy and ideology of urban development with implications of urban “territorial domination.”

<sup>7</sup>ATTILA KOTÁNYI, RAOUL VANEIGEM, Bureau of Unitary Urbanism, 1961

mental conditioning and as such produce a more genuine critique of the existing situation of our social system.

For the maintenance of such spaces action must be taken to insure their survival, we must campaign to ensure the whole subsidies system is rebalanced to favour those local custodians of rural life and to prevent multinational companies exploiting it for their own gains. Simultaneously arts policy and artists own agendas need to reflect an existentialist will to fashion their own destiny and utilise their own freedom to create their own world. The artist becomes that “being that hurls himself towards a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as a being in the future”<sup>8</sup> and every action becomes “an exemplary act”.

A new and critically engaged contemporary, rural art practice must find its genesis. It will take as the serious subject matter for contemporary art the preservation and reinvigoration of rural and folk culture in distinct opposition to Urban-centric, metropolitan definitions of culture and identity. The constant conceptual promotion of urban/global/multi/mass culture at the expense of the treasure trove of centuries of local traditions is no longer valid. Artists can use their position of relative freedom to intervene, disrupt and jam the messages from the ‘bards of conditioning’<sup>9</sup>, to define a new psycho-geography where the rural operates as a valid and indeed necessary condition of human consciousness, to produce a physical and virtual network of monuments to rural folk culture and traditions through the new guise of contemporary art. They can recapture and resurrect traditional cultural landmarks both literally and ideologically, enacting a three-fold occupation of cultural-ideological space, physical space in the landscape and virtual space on the internet. They can make work that enables them to deal with the complex relationships between narrative and the landscape/environment and the issues that such an interplay raises in how we define our various identities. In doing so they can recapture the reigns of contemporary artistic practice, ideologically transfixed by the shock of the new and redirect it towards the traditions that have been the inspiration for art and culture for hundreds of years. Hand in hand with this preservation and reinvigoration of folk culture goes the acknowledgement that rural space is critically important, indeed essential to presenting a true picture of the contemporary condition, it remains capable of showing us that ‘still, sad music of humanity. By seeking to remove the cultural object away from the traditional contexts of art, away from the commercial hubs of urban centres and out into the remote hills, woods and shores we are facilitating a deeper, broader and more complete vision of what it means to live today in our contemporary world and in the timeless struggle of our universal condition.

I am suggesting that rural artists begin to carve out their own agenda, beating out their own paths into the future. I am calling on artists to take up a diverse and contemporary approach to the history, mythology and traditions of our past, present and future, of the totality of our situation. I call on them to utilise their artistic practice as a vehicle for the re-engagement with heritage: a reinterpretation of this subject matter through a contemporary context and yet also an act of preservation. I

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<sup>8</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, 1946

<sup>9</sup>ATTILA KOTÁNYI, RAOUL VANEIGEM, *Bureau of Unitary Urbanism*, 1961

call on them to breathe new creative life into ancient stories, traditions and beliefs in order to shield them against extinction beneath the casual apathy of modern mass culture. I call on them to subvert the very language and iconography of this mass culture into the actual physical and theoretical tool of preservation itself. I call on them to refuse the accepted structures that hem in our existence and to make and to facilitate new choices, to live as an exemplary act, to celebrate the surreal, to confound the ideology of spectacle and to not cease from exploring. The artist's primary role must be to foster mistrust in reality.

As farmers trudge onwards towards the future in a daily struggle to keep the countryside breathing. Let us make our art a metonymic monument to this struggle. Without locally run farms forming the network that keeps rural communities together communities will die and with them culture, heritage, folklore, language and tradition dating back centuries. We are living in a cultural crisis, a crisis of stunning proportions. It is almost the duty I would say, of those who find themselves artists and those who find themselves living or working in the countryside to reflect that crisis and see if a future path can be beaten out that will stop great swathes of culture vanishing forever. It is a cultural struggle that is in full swing as we speak and it is a choice that one can make as an artist from a rural background: to chase the metropolitan dollar or to make the work that is necessary for the continuing cultural life of many country communities. It is a choice that I too have to make, do I commit to my principals in the only way I know how, thorough making art? Don't get me wrong, you have to live, I have to live, but a life where everything you love is dead is no life at all. Art can be a flag for these rural cultures: a flag that rallies the community, which embodies it, gives it visibility and a physical, visual essence, a flag that they display to the world with pride. As disingenuous politicians used to say in Wales in an attempt to stifle the nation's democratic self-determination 'you can't eat the flag'. But it's more than flags; flags are symbols, symbols of communities, of cultures and ways of life. Well you can't eat money either and if you don't plant things, if you don't grow things, then nobody eats and nobody lives.