Always Outsiders: Map-less Social Practice Art in the Ancient Landscape of a Global Geopark

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ABSTRACT


This paper explores social practice art in the rural and post-industrial environment of the Allen Valleys in the North Pennines AONB nestled in South West Northumberland. A place with a rich heritage and strong sense of community, of changing communities. Estate management struggles with ecological and biological protection projects. Farmers and artists alike look to tourism and social enterprise in attempts to diversify and survive. People from the cities increasingly flock to experience this “new rural idyll” as day trippers and commuters. Connections as old as the hills are being rediscovered, rethought, remade. I will explore two temporal site-specific art as research projects: *Lamb* – a six-weeks artist’s residency in a battered caravan on the site of an ancient smelt mill that sought to bring local traditions into stark contrast with contemporary issues around family and community, gender and sexuality, to forge a new cautionary tale; and *Northern Game* – a three-month project that explored the ancient sport of quoits: a game that brings together people from different hamlets to play together and talk together; a game that links different places and is both steeped in social, industrial, agricultural and environmental traditions and open to new possibilities. The paper will briefly demonstrate how social art praxis, rooted in the interdisciplinary practical and theoretical frames of rural geography (rural studies, performing ruralities, marginal places and
peripheries) and psychoanalysis (object relations theory, aesthetic experience, humanistic psychoanalysis), can offer new transdisciplinary potentialities; convergent boundaries.

The approach involved myself in collaboration with writer Lee Mattinson and poet and visual artist Stevie Ronnie searching and researching; documenting and deconstructing. We used techniques such as rural dérive (a technique based upon Situationism and psychogeography), disorientation, site-specific de-familiarisation, and the performance of everyday life, to create auto-ethnographic accounts from fragments of information. Familiar yet specifically unrecognisable performances and texts. Temporal. Everyday interventions that created potential spaces between playing and reality. Aesthetic experiences in which the tensions between outmoded distinctions of industry and agriculture, and nature and human existence, were collaboratively challenged and remade anew. Blurring lines on maps and in minds, we sought to present different ways of being in the place where we live; different ways of perceiving the passage of time. Places real and imagined. Nexus thinking. Little signposts towards social and ecological resilience. Tensions. Transitions. Seeing things differently. Not knowing. Never known. A view is always worth it.

481 words.


This paper explores social practice art in the rural and post-industrial environment of the Allen Valleys in the North Pennines AONB nestled in South West Northumberland. A place with a rich heritage and strong sense of community, of changing communities. Estate management struggles with ecological and biological protection projects. Farmers and artists alike look to tourism and social enterprise in attempts to diversify and survive. People from the cities increasingly flock to experience this “new rural idyll” as day trippers and commuters. Connections as old as the hills are being rediscovered, rethought, remade. We will explore two temporal site-specific art as research projects: Lamb – local traditions meet contemporary issues around family and community, gender and sexuality to forge a new cautionary tale\(^1\); and NorthernGame – the ancient sport of quoits as a means of potentially increasing community participation. I propose that social practice, or, more precisely, social praxis art, when rooted in the interdisciplinary, practical and theoretical frames of geography (rural studies, performing ruralities, marginal places and peripheries) and those of psychoanalysis (object relations theory, aesthetic experience, humanistic psychoanalysis) can offer new transdisciplinary potentialities and convergent boundaries.

[I’m] more concerned with land use than with landscape, more focused on what we learn from living in a place than what we see when we look out the windows\(^2\) (Lippard, 2014, p. 4).

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\(^1\) The full transcript of Lamb by Lee Mattinson (2013) is available here: [http://troubleupmill.tumblr.com](http://troubleupmill.tumblr.com).

\(^2\) Lucy Lippard expands upon this artistic perspective later in Undermining, explaining: ‘Looking for new angles from which to affect the ways we define and defile the natural, often without the ego adrenalin demanded by the
My methodology is simple and experiential: one thing leads to another, as in life (ibid., p. 5).

Cultural history and cultural geography are the operative factors … (ibid.)

The connections between art and geography are not new. Art undoubtedly conspired to promote notions of ‘new rural idylls’: ‘a socially dominant and dominating way of conceiving of – cognitively, emotionally or aesthetically – and presenting rural space’ (Phillips, et al., 2001, p. 5). I argue that this ‘idyllic vision of a healthy, peaceful, natural way of life’ (Little, 1987, p. 186) has led to rural gentrification, and concerns about displacement and loss of local ways of living. This process ushers in new ‘service-class’ inhabitants with ‘both the powers and the desire to live in the countryside’: rural colonisation which, as Martin Phillips argues, has the power to ‘change or “restructure”/ “reconstitute” the countryside’ (1998, p. 135). The colonisation of the countryside also brings new social fractures, new differences, new forms of otherness (Philo, 1992, p. 201). Furthermore, it challenges traditional British ideals about a white, patriarchal, subservient rural way of life: a ‘racially coded’ (false) sense of identity (Neal & Agyeman, 2006, p. 99). These are contexts well suited to social praxis art.

My work is based in ‘The North’: a peripheral, wild, bleak, distant place which Rob Shields describes as ‘the pole against which the civilisation of the South has been compared’ (Shields, 1991, p. 230). Marginal places. Places not of ‘high culture’ but, rather, a leisure zone: places for ‘hiking, fishing, or for the British version of “unspoiled nature”’ (ibid., p. 231). Peripheral places, marginalised people. Undermining.

For example, Thomas Jellis states: ‘The relation between geography and art has attracted considerable interest over the past decade’ (2015, p. 369).

Jo Little, for example, argues that these non-uniform processes ‘have led in extreme cases to the gentrification of villages and the wholesale replacement of one population with another’ (1987, p. 186).

Rob Shields describes marginal places as: ‘those towns and regions which have been “left behind” in the modern race for progress, evoke both nostalgia and fascination. Their marginal status may come from out-of-the-way geographic locations, being the site of illicit or disdained social activities, or being the Other pole to a great cultural centre. In all cases the type of geographic marginality … is a mark of being a social periphery’ (1991, p. 3). These peripheral places ‘are not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other … From this primary ranking of cultural status they may also end up being classified in what geographers have mapped as systems of “centres and peripheries”’ (ibid.).

For Shields: ‘The social definition of marginal places and spaces is intimately linked with the categorisation of objects, practices, ideas and modes of social interaction as belonging to the “Low culture”, the culture of marginal places and spaces, the culture of the marginalised’ (ibid., pp. 4-5).
Out on the margins, where local scars cover for global perpetrators, we live in a distorted mirror image of the center, which perceives our “nature” as primarily resource. Here negative space can be more important that what’s constructed from its deported materials elsewhere (Lippard, 2014, p. 10).

The North Pennines Global Geopark is full of scars, littered with post-industrial ‘dead zones’ (ibid., p. 11) and, as Lucy Lippard points out: ‘Local landscapes reflect global crises. Nothing is more local than ecology …’ (ibid., p. 111).


And yet, as Heley and Jones suggest, ‘our understandings of spatiality have become less constrained by bounded (territory) or hierarchical (scalar) structural forms, and our spatial analyses have become more attentive to connectivity in all its forms’ (2012, p. 208). Unboundaried spaces. Permeable, constantly shifting boundaries lead to ideas about performing ruralities. For Edensor: ‘It is through the relationship between the array of characters playing out particular roles, and the spaces in which they perform, that ruralities are routinely produced’ (2006, p. 484). I argue that rural social praxis art – all social praxis art – produces and reproduces relationships, performances. For Michael Woods:

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7 Lucy Lippard describes these ‘dead zones’ as follows: ‘Like graves, these pits – whether they are dwellings or burial grounds or archaeological digs or the remnants of industries that claim to keep us alive – are eventually abandoned, their meanings forgotten, leaving stubborn scars on the land … “dead zones” …’ (2014, p. 11).  
8 Gillian Rose describes permeable boundaries as follows: ‘Increasing flows of ideas, commodities, information and people are constantly challenging senses of place and identity which perceive themselves as stable and fixed. The increasing interdependence between places means that, for many academics at least, places must be seen as having permeable boundaries across which things are always moving’ (Rose, 1995, p. 116).
Exchanging gossip, casual surveillance, volunteering, taking part in sports clubs and village associations, attending community events, working communal land, drinking and socializing, are among the activities that have been observed as practices that serve to perform rural community’ (2010, p. 837).

This understanding is critical to my practice. A starting point. An acknowledgement that:

Rurality is performed by rural residents and immigrants, farmers, landowners, workers, tourists and tourist attractions, recreational visitors, policy-makers, the media, and academic researchers (ibid., p. 843).

Clearly, there is much to be gained from ‘the intellectual interplay between geography and the humanities’ (2011, p. xix), as Douglas Richardson suggests. But, I wonder if there is also much to be gained from both practical interplay and, indeed, from playing, from play. As Lippard proposes:

Today, while specificity and local knowledge provide the base lines when the vortex of land and lives are being followed, a rich liminal space has opened up between disciplines, between “fine art,” photography, geography, history, archaeology, and sociology … (2014, p. 175).

I hope to be able to illustrate a practical interplay in the brief examples that follow.

... It is a question of contingencies overlapping. The events which take place in this field – two birds chasing one another, a cloud crossing the sun and changing the colour of the green – acquire a special significance because they occur during the minute or two which I am obliged to wait. It is as though these minutes fill a certain area of time which exactly fits the spatial area of the field. Time and space conjoin.’ (Berger, 1979, p. 193).

Experiences. Experiential techniques to create auto-ethnographic narratives and images from fragments of information: unstructured rural dérives, disorientation, site-specific de-familiarisation, and the performance of everyday life. Familiar yet specifically unrecognisable performances and texts. Temporal. Everyday interventions. Potential spaces between playing and reality. Aesthetic experiences in which the tensions between outmoded distinctions of industry and agriculture, and nature and human existence, were collaboratively

Remember what it was like to be sung to sleep. If you are fortunate, the memory will be more recent than childhood. The repeated lines of words and music are like paths. These paths are circular and the rings they make are linked together like those of a chain. You walk along these paths together like those of a chain. You walk along these paths and are led by them in circles which lead from one to the other, further and further away. The field upon which you walk an upon which the chain is laid is the song (Berger, 1979, p. 192)

... 

*Lamb.*

Malachi was such a rare sight in the village that, if spotted, he was dismissed as a ghost. An apparition of one of the children melted centuries ago in the smelt chimneys. And so he existed. From day to day. Year to year. Awaiting his parents. Or even just a dribble of their love.

Malachi’s village was not just a village. It was a community, albeit one which he could only observe from afar. From its pencil-lined periphery, delicately sketched on the most ancient of maps in the oldest of libraries.

But with the oldest of places come the oldest of traditions (Mattinson, 2013).

Lee Mattinson fell into embers on New Year’s Eve, 2012. An optimistic yet ultimately futile attempt to navigate Allendale’s Baal fire. He vowed to return one day. The owners of the heritage site at Allen Smelt Mill offered a caravan, hoping that artists would, as prophesied by many a creative industries guide, bring tourists, passers-by and other artists to the mill which was being restored (as an ancient monument) and regenerated (as a rural small business zone). Always a big ask. I challenged Lee to spend six weeks as artist in residence, exploring places around the Allen Valleys. He created *Lamb*, a new cautionary tale inspired by gossip overheard
and tales from meeting people whilst wandering ‘The Dale’, along with its history, agriculture and environment. It is also partly a product of Lee’s own hay fever-bedevilled quest to overcome fears of 1) the countryside; 2) spiders; 3) the dark; 4) moths; 5) bonfires; and 6) having to ‘read out loud in front of people’.

Lee was given three warnings by well-meaning and ‘delightfully sinister’ locals: ‘lock the gates, or the Others will get you’, to ‘not go down the mines or you’ll never be found’, and to watch out for the warren of underground tunnels, pits, bore holes and shafts which ‘regularly cave in on unwary folks’. His finished cautionary tale is fictive: challenging local traditions and celebrating an ‘inspiring sense of community’; about a little boy named Malachi who turns into a lamb after being left in the woods. A wild boy. An ‘idiot’ boy. A new narrative from old narratives. Lee describes the process as follows:

What stood out about the residency was the multitude of stories I heard that had ‘but you can’t put that in your blog’ or ‘don’t use that’ attached. And although it’d be wrong to expose the scandals of the village, I will have to use some of it. Because it’s gold dust. And gems of information that any writer would slaughter for.

…

Northern Game.

Catton. Carts Bog.¹⁰

Northern Game: wandering; searching out pubs in rural, sometimes wild, locations; watching; chatting; drinking; listening; observing; and, most of all, learning. Playing games as old as their even older hosts – the hills and dales of the North Pennines and South West Northumberland. Playing quoits: an ancient and traditional game with its own language, strong sense of community; mysterious and little-known. Strict rules, teams, league divisions, cups, local small business sponsors, individual competitions, festival ‘open’ games, and competition and camaraderie in equal measures. League games mostly take place in beer gardens and

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¹⁰ Locations where the Northern Game of quoits is still played in South West Northumberland.

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⁹ The suggestion that Malachi was said by villagers to be an ‘idiot’ boy is reminiscent of Chris Philo’s ‘Looking into the countryside from where he had come: placing the ‘idiot’, the 'idiot school' and different models of educating the uneducable in which he recounts the tale of “the savage of Aveyron”, a wild boy of the woods who some early 19th-century experts identified as an “idiot”’ (2016, p. 139).
adjoining fields of pubs and working men’s and conservative clubs. The measurements are in yards: the pits, one-yard square; distance from hob to hob, eleven yards. The ‘Northern Game’ has roots at least as old as Hadrian’s Wall. Blue clay is locally sourced from secret moorland sites. Climate change threatens its survival. But every summer, the air in Allen Valleys’ hills and dales chimes and thuds and rings.

*Ring, Ringer, Wring:* steel hob (stake) installed in gallery wall, brand new steel quoit gently swinging, suspended on shark wire; centrally located yard-square reclaimed wooden box full of blue clay (clarts), another hob standing proud of the surface, new quoit tilting alongside; rough handmade stone bench with rusting bucket, old scrubbing brush and beer towel – muddy water. Quoits players from as far as forty miles away brought unusual quoits, chatted, drank beer, threw some quoits, even talked a bit about art. Children swung and banged and clattered the suspended quoit against the wall-mounted hob over and over and over again until the white cube wall surrounding the hob began developing indentations and muddy impressions – marks made by people having a go. Quoit against hob; dancing away; drawn back towards the hob again. Almost perpetual motion.

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*Lamb.*

Malachi left the village that night with the stars exploding in the skies like water balloons. Ones filled up with glitter. With crystals. With magic and new beginnings. Raining down across this whole village, its river, fields and smelt mill ruins.

With a priest and an idiot alive but unable to ever tell tall tales again.

With a once lonely woman singing lullabies to her new born like they would one day go out of fashion.

With a scarecrow of a man destined for the final of Britain’s Got Talent.

With a farmer able to plough his fields again, plant his crop and watch it grow.

With an elderly couple hosting the biggest of Boxing Day dinners for the finest of family reunions.

And with retired Blackpool donkeys and scores of Spanish rabbits watching Malachi as he headed south to find his post-operative transsexual grandparent. Hope, for the first time, in his warm and once woolly little boy’s heart (Mattinson, 2013).
Bibliography


Philo, C., 2016. 'Looking into the countryside from where he had come': placing the 'idiot', the 'idiot school' and different models of educating the uneducable. *Cultural Geographies*, 23(1), pp. 139-157.


