

Audio Transcript

Title: The Work of Art | Rural Communities

Summary:

In this episode we'll be finding out what it's like to be an artist living and working in a rural community. From Aberdeenshire to the Orkney islands, we'll hear from artists about the benefits and drawbacks of living outwith big cities.

Duration: 22:04

Contributors: Jan Patience (arts journalist), Claudia Zeiske (founding director of Deveron Projects), Anna Francis (artist) and Rebecca Davies (artist), Rachel Ashton (artist), Kari Adams (artist and Museum & Gallery Assistant, the Pier Arts Centre), and members of the MOTI Collective (Ingrid Garrioch, Emma Fraser, Kerriane Flett, Stephanie Spence, and Louise Barrington).

Transcript

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[Music]

Claudia Zeiske

What people in the city do at art openings - they drink Prosecco or something. We go for a walk instead [laughs].

Jan Patience

I'm arts journalist Jan Patience and you're listening to *The Work of Art*, a podcast by the National Galleries of Scotland. In this three part series we'll be looking at the issues that face artists working in Scotland today. From running their own spaces, to funding their own work, and what happens when public opinion is divided?

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[Music]

In this episode we'll be finding out what it's like to live and work as an artist in a rural community. Although we think of cities as the key centres of art in Scotland, artists communities and centres exist and thrive all over the country. Small communities are not synonymous with small ideas! Claudia Zeiske moved from her native Germany to Huntly 22 years ago. Halfway between Aberdeen and Elgin, Huntly is a small market town at the foot of the Cairngorms with about 4,500 inhabitants. Claudia is not someone who thinks small... She established Deveron Arts, now known as Deveron Projects, from her living

room, and last year she undertook a project which saw her walk from her adopted home of Huntly, to her mother's home near Munich.

To get a better sense of Deveron Projects, Claudia gave us a tour of its premises.

[Door closing]

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Claudia Zeiske

So we have been in existence since 1995, but initially a very voluntary organisation, quite sort of traditional art development in the rural area, and then it has sort of grown into a more international and year round programme that we are running now. And then here we have a library, and it's quite dedicated to socially engaged art, that library, and the other part is sort of to Arden walking, this is a sort of real passion we have, we use walking a lot to bring people together, to socialise. So walking, cooking, gardening, and eating is actually sort of the mechanisms, how we try to bring people together.

We have done over 100 projects over the years and each project at the end gets an archive. So this is our archive and you can see it gets very full. And the archive is also mirrored digitally on the website.

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We have two houses; we don't own those houses, but we have them - one we get for free from a local philanthropist, one could say, and the other one we get very cheaply from a very kind-minded person, so that's where the artists and the interns live. And then otherwise we have this, we get this for free from the council, because basically these places was completely run down and we found money to do it a little bit up, and we share now the premises with a library and with the Huntly Development Trust.

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Jan Patience

Instead of having a gallery space, Deveron Projects sees the town as the venue. They invite artists to work within the community to create socially engaged projects. Not surprisingly, people are curious to visit.

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Anna Francis

I'm Anna-Francis

Rebecca Davies

...and I'm Rebecca Davies

Anna Francis

...and yeah, we're artists, we're based in Stoke-on-Trent, and we've just up in Lumsden doing a residency and I've been following Deveron's work for quite a long time, and while we're here we just thought it would be great to come and see the work for ourselves and...

Rebecca Davies

I think seeing how embedded Deveron is in the place, in Huntly, which is, it's quite a strange place in a way, to me, because it's not close to a big city, but there's this amazing wealth of artistic practice happening here and I think it's really good just to see how an arts programme can make such a difference you know, in a place like Huntly. So yeah, we just really wanted to come and see, you know, how's it working, on a kind of daily basis, because I guess if you're looking from afar you get a good sense of it, but it's really interesting to come and see you know how people are coming to the Friday lunch, and hearing the talks, and seeing the work that's happening.

[There's our brochure...]

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Claudia Zeiske

It's just a small town where we have everything like a school, and library, and swimming pool - what a big city has, but in a small format. And so we're here since 1995, and for us the town is the venue, so we quite deliberately don't have a gallery or an arts centre, but we sort of populate and inhabit the town as other people do. And what's important is that we listen carefully in almost an anthropological way, through participant observation we all live here, and we work here, and live here, and live here, and work here... So it's quite important, sort of, to always gather what people need and what makes the town tick. And so we identify the issues and the problems, and the kind of topics that we work with, and then we bring artists to the town that collaborate with the town folks.

[Music]

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We bring from all over the world, so they're sometimes coming from this area, but we bring people from other places around Scotland, but as well from abroad. We've had artists from as far as Cuba and Congo and Ethiopia, and artists from China, and India, and Lebanon and so on. So that is quite important to keep always this local-global dimension, and we call 50-50 approach. So it's local global, artists/community, locality and hospitality, and home and away - that kind of conundrum is what makes Deveron Arts tick.

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What really comes in really handy here, as a tool, is Patrick Geddes, who is a community planner that originally comes from Aberdeenshire, and he has a grid called, 'Work. Place. Folk'. So when we're talking about *Place, Work, Folk*, if you always have these as circles coming together, and he really believes in a 'good home' - you know, in quite an old fashioned sense. So if everybody has a good home, where the work works [laughs], the work and play, this dichotomy where friendship and conflict, and where nature and culture, so when we talk about nature/ culture, it's the environment, our architectural environment, our town planning as well as our local environment, erm, you know the forest that we have around here, and we are sort of here in the foothills of the Cairngorms, where this is all acknowledged and works well together. So you have a good home and if everybody had a good home we would have a very good world - this is in a nutshell how he thinks.

[Music]

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And so we take this kind of framework as a starting point, and that is very important for us. The other things that are quite important is you know, what are the tools? And actually walking is a very important tool for us, but another one is actually gardening, and eh cooking and eating together. That whole cycle of hospitality and looking at what place one has and bringing people together. So every week we do a Friday lunch, and for this Friday lunch we invite a speaker, and that can, very often be a speaker just from our locality. We had all kind of people; a local farmer talking about their work, or maybe a local doctor talking about their work, but we also have had artists from, through Skype, from very far-flung places, people who could never travel at this very moment in time. And so today we had another Friday lunch, and all kind of people come to this, both our staff as well as the artists, but also people from the community and like today there was the local MP, he joined the lunch today.

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[Background chat from the Friday lunch]

00:08:05:01

Rachel Ashton

So my name's Rachel Ashton and I live about 10 miles out of Huntly. I'm a painter and this is my first artist residency. So Claudia from Deveron Projects approached me about just under a year ago, and suggested this project to me which is a collaboration with another painter who is in Gaza, who is also an artist in residence here with us but will never actually physically be here in Huntly. So we've been communicating by WhatsApp and Facebook, and Skype and so on for almost a year, and sharing videos of each other's landscape which we're both painting, and learning a bit about each others' country obviously in the communication. But it's quite a different way of working for me because I'm too... I'm being presented with subjects to paint rather than choosing my own. And even though I do paint landscapes, sometimes certain types of landscapes, you know I'll be drawn to certain scenes that I can stylise in the way that I do, and this has been quite a different way of working which has been very interesting for me, and I think quite expanding for my practice because I'm trying sort of a lot of new things.

[Music]

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Claudia Zeiske

I think every place has something interesting to offer and you just have to look very deeply. This model, the town is the venue, only works for small places. I don't think it works in a city. You cannot deal with a million people. You know, for us, the amount of people that we have here is like a big hospital, a big factory or something, that's the kind of amount of people we have to sometimes manage. I won't at all say that we are managing people, but we can sort of oversee it. Whereas you couldn't do that in a big city like Glasgow. So that is quite important that we can, quite easily, bring together a whole

range of people. Whereas I feel in the city this is always, you're very quickly much more compartmentalised and I would not be able to introduce this methodology as easily there. I would have to think a different way.

[Music]

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Jan Patience

Working in a rural area can provide artists and organisations with the opportunity to think differently, and to create something which exists more tangibly outside the art world.

[Music]

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I went to see *A New Era* - an exhibition of Scottish Modern art at the National Galleries of Scotland in 2018. Senior Curator, Alice Strang, was there, and she told me about Scottish artists associated with the famous artist colony at St Ives in Cornwall.

Alice Strang

Margaret Mellis, who's represented in the exhibition, she studied at Edinburgh College of Art and then she moved down to London, and she married the critic Adrian Stokes. And they bought a relatively large house, Little Parc Owles in Carbis Bay, not far from St Ives. And when the Second World War began in 1939, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, their triplets, cook and nanny, went to stay with Mellis and Stokes, and Naum Gabo and his wife, and their daughter, moved nearby relatively soon afterwards. And in fact, just in 1940 Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, on the renewal of her maintenance scholarship from Edinburgh College of Art, would traditionally gone to France, but of course, the conflict ruled that out. So it's wonderful Principal - Hubert Wellington, suggested that she go down to St Ives because he knew that there were this group of British modernists working there with whom he thought she would be in sympathy - and it's true, Barns-Graham moves down to St Ives in 1940 and therefore joined the fledgling St Ives School and becomes a pioneer of British abstraction in her own right.

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Jan Patience

This influx of artists established St Ives as the centre for modern and abstract developments in British art. They created a collective in rural Cornwall which operated the more established art scenes in cities like London, Paris and Edinburgh. Tate St Ives has an extensive of work by the St Ives School, but that's not the only place where you can see their work. Kari Adams, Museum and Gallery Assistant at the Pier Arts Centre in Orkney:

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Kari Adams

The permanent collection here - the original core collection, was gifted by Margaret Gardiner to the people of Orkney, and she was pivotal in establishing the art centre here. And her collection was predominantly made up of Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Alfred Wallace, Peter Lanyon, Margaret Mellis, Terry Frost, the sort of core St Ives artists. She moved in all of these circles, and she bought art for very personal reasons, and as a means of actually supporting her friends, it was, you know, buying their artwork as a way of actually putting bread on the table for them, so her decision to give the people of Orkney this wonderful collection, made up of all the St Ives artists, was to really establish something special up here. And I think, for artists and creatives working here today, erm, it's a invaluable resource. It's a place where people can come and spend quiet time, people can come to events, people can be involved in projects, people can exhibit here, we've got an open exhibition every Christmas, so it really is central in supporting local arts within the community here in Stromness.

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Jan Patience

Margaret Gardner's bequest to Orkney, and the subsequent establishment of the Pier Arts Centre created a ripple effect within the creative community. Since it was established in 1979 the Pier has expanded its collection, developed an engaging programme, and provided opportunities for artists. As well as working as working at the Pier, Kari is also an artist, and a member of the MOTI collective - a group of young artists based in Orkney.

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Ingrid Garrioch

I'm Ingrid Garrioch, and I'm from Orkney, and currently live and work in Orkney. I studied fashion textiles at uni, and that's what I do daily, is work as a designer.

Emma Fraser

I'm Emma Fraser, I live and work in Orkney as well, and I grew up here. I normally do 3D installations.

Kerriane Flett

I'm Kerriane Flett I studied at Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee. I currently work in ceramics.

Stephanie Spence

I'm Stephanie Spence and I live and work in Orkney. My work is mainly architectural based. I find influence in all different types of buildings and look at the more geometric shapes within them. And I work at the Pier Arts Centre here for the MOTI exhibition as well.

Louise Barrington

My name is Louise Barrington and I'm based here in Orkney, from Orkney as well. I studied in London, I decided being an 18 year old to head to the big lights and went to St Martins, I did textile design, and then I went to the Slade and did fine art in the sculpture department.

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Jan Patience

Returning to Orkney, Louise helped set up the MOTI collective and found that working as a group eased some of the pressures of working alone.

Louise Barrington

The idea was that people, graduates from Orkney College, and folk coming back to Orkney like myself, would have a kind of like a support group, or a group, or would kind of show work or would do something. So we had our first show in the Orkney Museum, and a lot of folk have approached us, so the Pier for instance, last summer we put on a show in a small gallery called North Lights in Stromness. It's more of a case of folk opting in instead of opting out, so with everyday life people are busy, and work, and there's that opportunity to kind of just keep making, to show work, have this support, have a dialogue between each other, and I think that's important in any place whether it's a city, or the countryside or the islands. That's really the kind of focus is to keep making work. Especially with Orkney College having their graduates coming out more out each year, depending on the numbers, we're there for folk and for folk returning to the islands as well.

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Kari Adams

Most of us are based here throughout the year, but some of us do have work that takes us off the island for instance, but I think in a way that only underscores this whole idea that, well maybe we're not that remote, maybe we're not that separate from everything else that goes on, maybe we are still facing the same challenges that an artist in Edinburgh and Glasgow would face, just the challenge of making new work, of having a studio space, having the funding to put on an exhibition, the funding to make a catalogue, or, these are all challenges that as an individual you face, but as a collective you can kind of tackle in a slightly different way, you can sort of hone and drive all these different skills that everybody brings to that collective and you can kind of share that pressure, it just eases things I think for you.

Ingrid Garrioch

I feel really lucky in the sense that, well so I studied fashion and textiles away and I worked as a designer away, I also saw an opportunity to come and work with a small design studio locally, and took it, because I feel like often it's been the case of, in the kind of, rural environments that sometimes you've just got to take the decision to do your own work and that's the way that you can pursue that within a specific place. But I would certainly like to think that even recently it seems like there's a lot more opportunities for young people to

pursue kind of their interests, but equally because there have been so many creatives who have set up or just followed their passions in Orkney. You're kind of already aware of that community and kind of seeing people having done it before doesn't limit your mind-set. I think, being brought up in a rural community, you're just very aware that if you do want to go places or do things it's just part your day to day life that you maybe need to travel that bit further or overcome these challenges.

Emma Fraser

It does have drawbacks though, because you have like a limited audience, because, it has its plus side because it's easier for people to know who you are and to know your work, but then there is only so many people that live in Orkney as well which can be a bit limiting.

Kari Adams

Even just the pressure of town/city life, you can feel overwhelmed almost. And there are so many options that you end up becoming even more confused or you don't necessarily go and follow your dreams, but here there is definitely, I don't know, it's quite magic actually. And I think everyone sitting here, whether we have part time jobs, whether we're practising artists, I think there's that focus there, and yep the support of a wider community as well as this sort of core artist collective that makes you just want to follow your heart and keep making.

Emma Fraser

We're an island, so we make our own way; we make our own way of doing things. And I think that's maybe that's part of what you find so magic about Orkney, is that if you want to do something you find a way to do it, and that just typifies island life. You always know who to go to. In a place like Orkney, so if I'm wanting to make something and I don't know how to go about making it, I will know somebody who does film, or does, I dunno a joiner, I know lots of other people so if I have a problem it's much easier for me to be able to find somebody that I know might be able to help me resolve a problem. And so we're all kind of living on top of each other, but it's actually, sometimes claustrophobic, but it can be really helpful as well because you know exactly who to go to if you have an idea or you want to achieve a certain goal, and then you think, 'oh I know Louise is really into that and maybe she wants to join in on it', or not just within MOTI but within the whole community. I don't make my money through being creative, I have several little part-time jobs, but I do art workshops here at the Pier Arts Centre. the Pier Arts Centre is a really good facility because there's lots of things going on and lots of opportunities, and they mentored me through from the very beginning, learning to do them and now I do the workshops here. So it's a really good, positive environment to be around, but there's not a lot of places like the Pier Arts Centre for the amount of people who would like to have jobs like that. So I think we're quite lucky that everybody else here except me, works, makes their money from being creative, but there's lots of people who don't. And there is, I don't think there is, there is plenty of opportunities, but not enough, which that's just the way it goes in a small community.



The Work of Art is a three part series brought to you by the National Galleries of Scotland, with me, Jan Patience.

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