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MEANWHILE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

Report from the IETM Brussels Plenary Meeting, 23 – 26 November 2017

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Meanwhile in the Countryside

In the beginning of the discussion, participants shared their reasons to participate in this session. Some of them came from small settlements and were wondering how to enrich the cultural life there. Others had just moved to the countryside and wanted to gather ideas on how to establish their practices there. Cultural managers and artists with experience of working in rural areas wanted to exchange ideas and to challenge their practices with new methods of work. There were people from the urban areas who were interested in working in rural places. And of course, there were participants who wanted to challenge the notion of bringing culture to the countryside, claiming that there is already a culture, and a deeply rooted one.

Our current obsession with only the city is highly irresponsible, because you cannot understand the city without understanding the countryside.

Rem Koolhaas

Before proceeding to the showcases and the discussion, Henk Keizer introduced some basic parameters of the contemporary countryside through his experience of working in the rural parts of the Netherlands.

The basics of a modern countryside (the Netherlands)

We are accustomed to think that the greatest shifts and revolutions happen in the cities but the countryside has been revolutionised even more, Henk Keizer argued. The decades after the Second World War marked a huge turn in agriculture and farming: the shift to industrial farming. Modern farms hardly resemble the traditional ones. Usually one cannot see neither stock, nor people. Just buildings and machines. Industrial agriculture leads to unification of the countryside: all buildings start looking alike.

There is a huge pressure to reduce the



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Moderator: Henk Keizer, Producer - Aquasonic and Rural Forums, the Netherlands

Speakers:

Lene Noer, Visual artist, Denmark

Jeremy Smith, Arts Practice Director - Community, Emerging & Experimental Arts, Australia Council for the Arts, Australia

Lucy Neal, Creative Associate - Encounters, UK

Bozhena Zakaliuzhna, Director - Jam Factory Art Center, Ukraine

cost of agricultural production constantly. The price of the agricultural resources does not fall down so the farmers have to figure alternative ways to keep the prices of their production low. Seasonal workers from Eastern Europe work in the fields of Western Europe, Indian farmers go to Italy to work in the dairies. That is how new people get in the countryside and these people are usually very welcome because they are the workforce of modern agriculture. These people also bring their own cultures to the countryside.

Land ownership has also changed. Land has been traded on the global land market. The owner might be based in a different state or on a different continent*. It is not unusual now that the farmers do not know who owns the land they have been working on.

AZC Ter Apel, one of the largest and main refugee camps in the Netherlands, which can accommodate 2000 refugees, is located near the village of Ter Apel with approximately 8000 inhabitants.

So we might say every aspect of the modern world affects the countryside. The oil peak, the global market, changes in means of production, the global warming and the ecological crisis, globalisation, seasonal migration, the refugee crisis, political turmoil, the rise of populism - all these transform the countryside.

What could art possibly do in such reality? Can art also be a medium of change? Judging from his vast experience with

* We should note that these are recent developments solely in concern with European lands. They are not new to the rest of the world.

working in the countryside, Henk Keizer claimed that art in the countryside is not about bringing urban performances on the spot. It is about active listening to the stories of the countryside. In his work in the rural areas, he started from site specific works but turned his interest to social specific works: who is living in a specific place, what are their stories, why is it this way. Active listening to the local community and its life proved to be a sustainable approach to working in the countryside. The work of [PeerGroupP](#), the Straw Castle, for example, is a project that was built on a close collaboration with the local community.

[The Rural Forums](#), another initiative Henk has been involved in, is aimed to research, show and discuss why and how art can play a role in rural development. The dialogue on this subject has been taken out of the art institutes to the rural areas and is open to anyone who has influence on life in the rural areas: artists, citizens, expats, refugees, farmers, consumers, bankers, policy makers, and scientists.

A successful example of how art can be made from the countryside stories, is [We, Pig Country](#), a performance by [Lucas de Man / Nieuwe Helden](#) developed for the Province of West Flanders in 2012. The performance has been staged in farms across the countryside with a great audience response. Several theatres requested the performance too and a Danish version of it is under development.

Do not bring culture to the countryside - it is already there. Go to the audiences and to the people on the spot. Be open and listen to their story. Write it, compose it, present them their story.

Lessons from the countryside (Denmark)

Lene Noer, a visual artist from Denmark, talked about her experience working in the Danish countryside since 2013. She has been working in 4 villages in the Fursund area* in collaboration with the visual artist and curator Birgitte Ejdrup Kristense. Initially they were invited by the citizens of the first village, and as a result of their

work they were asked by the community of Fursund to extend the art project to the 3 other villages, thus establishing [the Grasslands initiative](#). Each village required a different approach, so the most important thing was to keep an open mind and to be responsive to the needs of the citizens, Lene asserted.

The first collaborative project was a site specific contemporary monument which is owned by the inhabitants of the village of Selde and is being used as a stage. The next project was the new town square in the village of Junget, with a campfire and a meeting place built of bricks of local demolished houses. The third project, in the village of Aasted, was developed in collaboration with the Irish artist Deirdre O'Mahony. The collection of scrapbooks, newspaper clippings and citizens' photos, about the village's cultural life, events and controversies was turned into murals. In Thorum, the fourth place where Lene and her partner were commissioned to develop a project, the locals wanted a new village forest but no art in it, so in the end the project there developed as a continuation of the work [7000 Oaks](#) by Joseph Beuys. These and other art projects in the countryside were presented and discussed at the [Rural Forum Midtjylland](#), 1-3 September 2017.

While presenting photos, sketches and scenes from the projects above, Lene Noer shared the lessons they have learned by

working for four years in the countryside.

One cannot just go to a village and make a fancy art project and leave in a year. You have to stay for a longer time, 3-5 years, because of the impacts your work develops over time. As an artist, you have responsibility for the changes you have caused in the local community. You have to approach the project with modesty and prepare to listen attentively and actively to the people who live on the spot. Other important lessons are:

- A thorough research is a must.
- Show interest, attention, approval, and respect. Make sure the people have understood you and that you are on the same level.
- Base the art works on citizens' ideas and wishes but do not comply with just following expectations. "Give us what we cannot imagine!", exclaimed a local citizen at a meeting in the village of Aasted; and that proved to be the fruitful approach to make art there.
- Take part in the local life and culture. Win hearts!

* An area in the Central Denmark Region (Region Midtjylland), which main city is Aarhus, European Capital of Culture 2017



The citizens of Aasted draw murals with the artists ©Lene Noer

- Involve citizens in all stages of the project. Equip the participants with the adequate skills, to make them feel safe and confident throughout the process and ensure a good result.
- Involve the municipality authorities too. You will surely need them on your side.
- Ensure the attention of the media.

Stories from the vast countryside (Australia)

Jeremy Smith, Arts Practice Director - [Community, Emerging & Experimental Arts, Australia Council for the Arts](#), introduced the completely different context of Australian countryside, where you can fly by plane for three hours and still be in the same region, where the countryside is referred as RRR: 'regional, rural and remote*', and at these lands there has been a continuous culture of 60 000 years.

The Australia Council supports the community arts and cultural development artists, practitioners, organisations, projects and programmes through a range of grants and initiatives. The Community Arts and Cultural Development programme is an important tool for fostering art in regional Australia. It encompasses collaborations between professional artists and local groups based on a community's desire to achieve artistic and social outcomes.

Jeremy Smith demonstrated the positive impact of these initiatives with findings from the latest edition of *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*, June 2017.

The vast majority of people living in regional Australia recognise positive impacts of the arts on their lives (84%). 7 of 10 believe the arts had a 'big' or 'very big' impact on stimulating their minds (68%). 57% believe the arts impact their sense of wellbeing and happiness. Around three quarters of regional Australians agree that Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia's culture (78%). 76% agree that artists make an important contribution to Australian society**.

Jeremy Smith outlined some effective approaches for promoting art in the remote regions of Australia. Not imposing your projects but being open to the local culture was pointed as an essential approach. Staying for longer periods, two to five years, ensured sustainability of the community art projects and allowed the positive impacts to develop. Festivals showed up to be a useful vehicle to introduce art and to explore diverse communities. So, the guiding principles and values of community work involve being collaborative and respectful towards the local communities, engaging the community to participate actively at all stages.

Jeremy Smith also believes that art in the countryside is a multidirectional process. It is not only about bringing artists to work with the local communities but also taking the countryside, its artists, its stories, to the city.

There were at least ten participants from Australia in the room, so Jeremy Smith invited them to contribute to the depiction of the Australian countryside with their experiences working there.

Jude Anderson, artistic director at [Punctum, Inc.](#), Central Victoria, Australia, has been working in rural regions of Chile, France, Italy, and Australia for the last 30 years. "So speaking 'country' has always been a part of my vocabulary," Jude said. The last ten years she has dedicated to sharing

this vocabulary with the Djadjawurrung community, a first nation, aboriginal people of Australia.

To illustrate the complexity of the language of the countryside, Jude asked all participants to share how they describe the soil, the typical flora and fauna, and the weather, in their country. Ten minutes was not enough time for any of us to explain even the basic specifics of the topic at our places.

The city Jude has been living, Castlemaine, in is called "Upside down place" in the Djadjawurrung language, because of the gold miners who literally turned the ground upside down when they were digging for gold.

The gold mining has attracted immigrants from around the world: Germans, Chinese and many more, whose descendants are still living in that place. Hence, the language of the country is already a complex one, as the culture is.

Places remember events.

James Joyce

* The term 'regional, rural and remote' or RRR includes all areas of Australia outside the capital cities or 'metropolitan' Australia. A map of RRR Australia: [here](#)

** More findings on the survey's webpage.



Talking about the soil and the crops in our countries. © Jana Gellinck

Steve Mayhew, Co-Director at Performance & Art Development Agency, Australia, shared his experience with *The Coriolis Effect* project. Starting in 2010, the project developed an innovative model of practice that invited civic engagement through regionally based live arts collaborations. The Coriolis Effect was presented as a body of work at the Regional Arts Australia Conference in Goolwa, October 2012.

Stories over a cup of tea and a biscuit, on a sofa in the street (UK)

Lucy Neal, Creative Associate, Encounters, London, UK, a theatre-maker and writer, a Londoner and urbanista, as she presented herself, introduced the urban perspective towards the countryside. Although she is based in London, she collaborates with *Encounters*, a creative group that works in the rural area. They also develop community and participatory art projects for urban areas and neighbourhoods.

Such a project was *Tooting Transition Shop* (2012) which was developed for the district of Tooting, a diverse and busy part of South London. For a day, the busses were diverted and a pop-up village green was established at the bus turning zone. The citizens were invited there to spend some time together and to reflect on how it feels like. Although the buses returned in the end of the day, the people would surely remember the stories they shared and the encounters they made. The project developed in a series of events, at one of which they installed a shop with 'nothing on sale but lots on offer' which purpose was to invite people to join in and share their stories.

Lucy Neal regards these invitations to people to join in as the core of Encounters' works. If your work is to be participatory, engaging and collaborative, then the craft of the invitation that you offer is crucial for the way it is accepted, hence for the result of your artwork. Lucy has reflected her experience in the handbook *Playing for Time: Making Art as if the World Mattered* identifying collaborative arts practices which aims at bringing change in response to planetary challenges.



Tooting transformed - from Lucy Neal's presentation

Another example of how the art of invitation worked was the *Arts and Health* project which Encounters developed in Torbay, a borough in Devon, Southwest England. The place is known for its beautiful nature and the sea. It is a popular resort but it features some surprising levels of social deprivation. There are children who have never been to the sea. 47% percent of the population voted to leave the EU. 1 in 3 people is over 60 years old. Some inhabitants are locals for generations whilst others have come recently and feel no connection with the place. At many places there is no cultural work for a long time. The *Arts and Health* project involved the local Health service as well in an attempt to increase the possibility for public health agencies to perceive arts and culture as a kind of a social care

programme.

The *Ageing Well* project was aimed at building connection between people but also to encourage to get connected with themselves. So Encounters installed sofas in the streets, outside shopping centres and invited people over a cup of tea and a biscuit to reflect on questions like 'what matters to you', 'what is important for your life to flourish'. Encounters then captured these ideas, memories, stories and experiences using a range of different creative tools and techniques and shared them back with the community. Together they explored ideas for change.



Come over for a cup of tea and a biscuit and share what matters to you? © Encounters arts

Based on her experience, Lucy Neal remarked that participatory projects in the countryside or in neighbourhoods often make the problems visible and may amplify the conflicts. At the same time, bridge building, creativity, collaboration implied by these projects unite people around their core values and help them to come together and find conditions to live together and flourish within the Earth's ecological limits.

The ongoing project of Encounter Arts, *The Making of Chrysalis*, a mobile arts, culture and learning space, is aimed at bringing together people of different ages and backgrounds who live or work in contrasting areas of South Devon, UK. Encounter Arts also provides courses on The Art Of Invitation which offer ways to bring groups of people together, encourage them to respond to the social and ecological challenges, and explore how making art together can accelerate change.

A simple game with play cards can bring a group of people together and build bridges between them. Choose a card with a word on it. Exchange it with another person. Tell each other a story which you connect to that word. Then share with the group the story that you have heard using your own words. You have already grown closer.

The stories of the city suburbs (Ukraine)

As it has become obvious from the case studies from the UK, the methods and approaches used in art and community projects in the countryside are viable in neighbourhoods and communities in the cities. Bozhena Zakaliuzhna, Director at Jam Factory Art Center, Lviv, Ukraine presented an example of how rural, suburban and urban are interrelated. The [Jam Factory Art Center](#) is a project dedicated to establishing a contemporary art center in a former industrial building in the UNESCO heritage city of Lviv, Ukraine.

The city of Lviv is about 1 million inhabitants, with impressive baroque architecture and prominent museums, art galleries, opera and theatre houses but without any

suitable infrastructure to foster contemporary arts. Therefore, the art centre envisages shaping a platform for international professional collaboration, and production of contemporary art and culture, for innovative and interdisciplinary programmes, and for creative enterprises and education.

For the site of the centre they have chosen an abandoned venue in the Northern part of Lviv. This territory has been cut off from the city by the railway since the late 19th century and has developed as an industrial area. It became a Jewish ghetto in the 1940s and almost everybody who lived there was eliminated. In Soviet times the area was populated with workers and people from the villages who relocated to the city. Now the area is in decline.

The building that has been chosen for the transformation into a contemporary art centre is a Jewish distillery from the late 19th century, which in the Soviet times functioned as a jam factory. When The Jam Factory Art Centre project started to evolve in 2015, the team conducted a research of the area which revealed that there were no cultural institutions in the whole district (except schools and libraries). The team's vision is to open the doors of the renovated art centre in 2020, and in the meanwhile, they are initiating a lot of innovative art projects to introduce the space to the local art scene. But what does this mean to the local citizens? Is it just about gentrification? The team has decided to involve the local people in the creation of

the centre and to turn them into supporters of the cause.

They have developed a series of art projects that relied on citizen participation. "It is always interesting to see who would be the first one to turn in and to bring the others", Bozhana observed. A Swedish architectural company started making workshops with the local children. In the beginning it was striking how these children from the industrial area were afraid of dreaming about their neighbourhood, constantly seeking for approval from their mentors. Gradually, things started changing. A project with elderly people is under development. It will be mostly about memory, aimed at collecting these people's stories about the Soviet times, about the neighbourhood. It became apparent that people do not appreciate what they have. They do not believe they are important and that is aimed to be changed through various art and community projects. There is also the difficulty to talk about the past: the German occupation, the Soviet occupation. All this has to be kept in mind when working in and with the community.

Closing

Closing the session, Henk Keizer announced that a forthcoming IETM Satellite Meeting in Wales in 2018 will be dedicated to the vast topic of working in the countryside. It will be a space for furthering the discussion.



The former Jam factory - from Bozhena Zakaliuzhna's presentation