Community Contexts Over Solutions: Observations from The Rural Art Network, Scotland

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ABSTRACT

The utilization of arts and culture within public engagement has been of increasing interest to policymakers and funding bodies as a response to socioeconomic issues within Scotland's rural and remote areas. However, the arts and cultural organizations undertaking projects related to community engagement often navigate these issues in isolation: the contexts experienced by remote and rural organizations that might contribute to, and benefit from, knowledge-sharing with other similar organizations also inhibit the development of community between said organizations. This text illustrates the facilitation of such knowledge-sharing through a Community of Practice and introduces findings from the resulting Rural Art Network Scotland.

Introduction

Scotland has a long history of innovative public engagement within the arts and cultures (Bishop 2012, Schrag 2016), especially those rural arts organizations that operate in complicated, isolated communities (Stevenson and Blanche 2015). The role of arts and culture within such engagement has been of increasing interest to both policymakers and funding bodies as a potential response to issues identified within Scotland's rural and remote areas stemming from declining and aging rural populations (Houston et al. 2008; Kelly et al. 2019). While these areas are located across a wide variety of geographical locations, their shared rurality plays a significant part in the issues identified and the responses to them, and the intersection of individual local contexts such as limited transport infrastructures and indices of multiple deprivations (Woolvin 2012; Scottish Government 2020) requires the development of unique innovations that creatively engage place and people.

Significantly - and problematically - the geographical nature of these organizations also hinders the exchange of insights, learning, and strategies *between* the rural arts organizations that engage in this manner of community and place-centric practice. Situated within the communities they attempt to serve, the contexts experienced by

remote and rural organizations that might contribute to beneficial knowledge-sharing and exchange with other similar organizations also inhibit such actions of solidarity and community between said organizations. As a result, there is a dearth of opportunity for rural and remotely situated arts organizations to share and learn from each other. Funding was therefore sought and secured *via* the Royal Society of Edinburgh to develop a network of cultural organizations based in rural and remote areas of Scotland over the course of two years. This text provides a deeper contextualization for the development of that network, and the findings from the Rural Art Network Scotland's activities.

Arts and culture in the rural

Defining rural/remote arts and culture

The arts are notoriously difficult to define (see: Abell 2012; Danto 2013), and it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a universal definition, but rather to suggest such activities contextual to each specific place. As such, the approach of the Network was not to focus upon specific approaches to or understandings of 'art', but to facilitate a network for any kind of rurally located cultural organizations whose work was responsive to their local community and context.

Similarly, the definition of what is 'rural' or 'remote' is contentious, variously defined within government policy on the basis of either geography, land-use, distance in travel time to central hubs, or economic performance (Brezzi, Dijkstra, and Ruiz 2011; Scottish Government 2022). Such definitions are further complicated when taking into consideration government priorities of cultural engagement and access. As an example, the town of Shotts is located within thirty minutes driving distance from the urban centers of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and as such is categorized by the Scottish Government as an "accessible small town" (Scottish Government 2022). However, as an extremely socio-economically disadvantaged community (Scottish Government 2020), Shotts may have more 'culturally' in common with "remote small towns" (Scottish Government 2022) such as Huntly, in rural Aberdeenshire when it comes to barriers to cultural participation, and so might be considered culturally remote. There are also assumptions about such rurally-situated locations which are idealized as romantic, wild, or solitary (Neal and Walters 2007; Philo, Parr, and Burns 2017) which have further problematized the ways in which rural contexts are understood. Rural and remote places are often placed in opposition to the 'urban' centers of power and problematized by policy makers, for example identifying that "issues such as transport, education and health can have a distinct impact on rural communities" (Scottish Government 2022, p.3). Such definitions, however, not only enhance binary dichotomies, but also reinforce power differentials. In her report on cultural leadership in rural Scotland, Dunbar (2020) points out that while many rural arts leaders defined themselves as 'central' to their communities, they were more-often-than-not externally defined as 'remote' by those in urban centers. These different understandings of rurality and remoteness suggest that, like the definition of 'arts', rural and remote contexts are not homogenous or easily defined. As such, the Rural Art Network Scotland (RANS) invited cultural organizations who self-defined as either 'rural' or 'remote' to explore mechanisms of support, learning and development.

Regeneration

Rural areas have been of growing interest amongst researchers and policy-makers alike as their complex contexts and histories offer a variety of opportunities for exploration into social issues that might be applied to broader or more generalized contexts. This is of note within research regarding the approaches taken toward community revitalization or regeneration within rural areas, in particular through the utilization of arts and culture in rural areas to combat socioeconomic issues related to declining rural populations and community-centric economies (Houston et al. 2008; Duxbury and Campbell 2011; Balfour, W-P Fortunato, and Alter 2018; Kelly et al. 2019). It is within this collection of research where arts and culture are discussed as an asset or resource that can be used for collective gain explicitly in rural areas.

In focusing on the role of arts and culture within rural regeneration, one avenue of interest has been in attracting artists and creatives to rural areas in Scotland (Houston et al. 2008; Balfour, W-P Fortunato, and Alter 2018). This approach builds off an assumption that such individuals not only have the means to spend locally on leisure and personal development, but also possess talent required to fill local skills gaps (Houston et al. 2008) and increase local tourism through the production of creative works (Duxbury and Campbell 2009). However, cultural workers are not only looked to for community improvement through their integration into – or replacement of – the network of local residents, but also to provide social services within the local area. In her doctoral research on arts development in rural Scotland, Lu (2015) found that many of the observed arts organizations began in response to the social and economic circumstances of their local communities and were subsequently credited as significant contributors to local regeneration efforts.

Attempts at supporting creative and cultural organizations and workers in rural Scotland with efforts related to community regeneration efforts have been met with distinct barriers: blanket-structure policies are noted as failing to account for the contextual complexities and variances within local level communities, such as differences in workforce capacities and public transportation infrastructure (Kelly et al. 2019). This is also observed on a larger scale with the regional differences between the Lowlands and the Highlands, the latter of which is more often prioritized within creative and cultural policy (Keating and Stevenson 2006). Additionally, rural arts and cultural organizations themselves struggle with navigating established funding structures and fitting in with available funding categories due to their increased likelihood of overlap with craft, heritage, or enterprise (Munro 2016), which are often key elements within reported increases to a sense of community and social belonging within rural areas (Balfour, W-P Fortunato, and Alter 2018; Kelly et al. 2019), yet sit within distinctly different funding approaches (Munro 2016).

Placemaking, social practice and community engagement

Within discussions surrounding the role of arts and culture within rural regeneration, place-making is explored as a potential cause of increased social and communal well-being, with engagement methods prioritizing place-making becoming of increasingly common interest for regeneration projects (Doering 2014). This has contributed

to a growing legislative investment in the UK of community-led wellbeing and development efforts (Markantoni et al. 2018).

Place-making – sometimes referred to as community-building (Balfour, W-P Fortunato, and Alter 2018) or community heritage (Beel et al. 2017) – is defined within the surveyed literature as a process of combining geographical, social, and cultural factors to create a personal or communal sense of belonging (Benson and Jackson 2012; Jarman 2018). While perceptions of this framework acknowledge the theoretical nature of place-making in the construction of community, Benson and Jackson (2012) specifically highlight the place-making process as an active one, placing emphasis on place-making as a repeated occurrence of everyday individual actions with the intention of shaping a place to fit a collective vision. Community-building can therefore be framed as an on-going, long-term practice, a perspective which contrasts greatly with the increasingly project-based, and therefore short-term, approaches to arts funding (Belfiore 2022). This is of particular importance to note for arts and cultural organizations dedicated to socially engaged arts practices within their organizational focus or approach to community programming, as practitioners must balance the short-term reporting requirements of funders with the long-term requirements of relational work within community-building.

This is not to suggest that participation within arts and cultural activities is guaranteed to generate an increased sense of community within rural areas: as much as such practices might aim to (or succeed) in bringing together members of a local area, they can equally create or further divisions within the existing communities. Research by van der Vaart, van Hoven, and Huigen (2019) on the social impacts of arts participation in rural Netherlands details this complexity, observing that while arts participation can contribute to a sense of community, it equally can deepen existing divisions or create new ones through the domination of standards of one group (van der Vaart, van Hoven, and Huigen 2019, p. 459). In other words, the enthusiastic interest and participation of some community members within arts and cultural activities can lead to the establishment of a particular type of community, rather than homogenous support or development of the entirety of a community. Concepts of placemaking, community development, or socially engaged arts must therefore all be understood somewhat critically, rather than simplistic solution to rural social complexities.

Rhizomatic and interconnected

In the complexities of a rural town – where the post-office might also be the local shop, and the post-master also the taxi driver who runs the rowing club on weekends – this project recognizes that rural and remote sites are socially and culturally complex. On one hand, these sites represent richly vibrant places that face an intricate set of threats to their sustainability: growing tourism to remote areas exacerbates housing costs and availability for existing area residents; significant youth-out migration and low birth-rates contribute to shrinking rural communities; transportation costs are exorbitant and highly dependent on individual vehicle ownership; and local ways of life are at risk in the face of economic needs and globalization pressures (Houston et al. 2008; Munro 2016; Kelly et al. 2019).

However, rural and remote places are also sites of innovation and enterprise: the rhizomatic interconnected nature of life within these contexts provides opportunities to rethink productive and contextual solutions. Indeed, reflecting through a lens of 'Community Cultural Development' (Adams and Goldbard 2001), culture is a resonant way to build community capacity and a sense of belonging; to increase community capacity toward more sustainable community-based tourism; and develop stronger participation in (and ownership of) tourism; as well as boosting cross-sectoral partnerships to pursue shared goals. Whilst this work was originally grounded supporting indigenous cultures in resisting globalization, it is relevant here because "*as globalization accelerates, community cultural development practice is more and more widely recognized as a powerful means of awakening and mobilizing alternatives to imposed cultural values*" (Adams and Goldbard 2001). These 'imposed cultural values' do not need to be macro, international level aggressions: seats of power in London or Edinburgh have the resources to implement policies or impose values that do not match other rural cultural contexts elsewhere in Scotland, for example. As such, the importance supporting local culture can be useful to communities in both Portree in the Isle of Skye or Dumfries in the Scottish Borders, and the strategies to enhance the specific contexts of individual and collective capacities are important to consider in rural and remote contexts.

In a fishbowl; in a bubble - management in rurality

Mutual surveillance

Within the context of a rural area, the experience of belonging to a community is dependent upon, and enhanced by, awareness of both being observed by other members of the local community and engaging in the practice of watching other members (Neal and Walters 2007; Philo, Parr, and Burns 2017). Within their paper on the relationship between self-discipline and rural visibility within remote and rural communities in the Scottish Highlands, Philo, Parr, and Burns (2017) highlight that while the highly visible nature of living in areas with low-population density contributes to a positive sense of being cared for and taking care of local community members, this level of visibility also generates a high level of gossip or "chattering" (p. 230) that contributes to feelings of regulation or ostracization for local residents. This contradictory framing of rural living is supported within Neal and Walters (2007) observations of rural spaces in England as being described by their residents as both regulated and unregulated sites: rural communities framed as both being free from the restrictive pace of urban areas and subjected to a high level of communal monitoring. In other words, the construction of community within rural areas relies on the surveillant exchange of information regarding the goings-on within the local community, or "neighbour knowledge" [sic] (Neal and Walters 2007, p. 253).

Both of these works connect the shared neighbor knowledges within rural communities to panoptic sensibilities of surveillance and self-regulation (Foucault 1980; Neal and Walters 2007; Philo, Parr, and Burns 2017), which solidifies a narrative of behavior(s) and knowledge(s) to be expected of individuals within the local community. The tensions within this surveillant nature of rural life are not restricted to the purely social aspects of community life, as organizations ranging from community groups to

places of work are similarly expected to engage in such practices to be deemed active, and therefore valid, within the larger community (Neal and Walters 2007).

For arts and cultural organizations in rural areas, the navigation of this reality of participation in rural communities can contribute to a sense of 'othering' within the both the local community they are situated within and the regional or national sector-based community they are a part of. Looking at the local, the high level of turnover within UK arts and cultural organizations due to an increased reliance on short-term and project-based contracts (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Brook et al. 2020; Belfiore 2022) means the organizations themselves can be held responsible in a way for the continual introduction of newcomers to rural areas who do not stay long enough to participate within local community practices. On a broader level, the informal nature of sharing neighbor knowledge can clash with expectations of organizational behaviors and standards held by sector and industry peers outside of rural areas as well as urban-centric stakeholders such as policy-makers and major funders, groups which rely on more formalized knowledge sharing processes such as organizational networking (Roberts and Townsend 2016; Gallagher 2021).

Isomorphism

Within this latter point, it is important to point out that the benefits of participation in formal networks for rural arts and cultural organization is framed as a result of learning *from* organizations and practitioners from outside rural areas: in her survey of management practices within rural arts organizations across the United States, Gallagher (2021) correlates engagement with urban-centric management networks with an increase in organizational capacity and productivity amongst rural organizations. Similarly, Roberts and Townsend (2016) link the increase of cultural capital amongst rural arts and cultural organizations with their knowledge gained from urban-situated individuals and networks. Both of these examples infer a one-directional supply of knowledge wherein organizations and practitioners based in non-rural areas are informed benefactors, framing those within rural contexts as working from a place of managerial or organizational deficit. Roberts and Townsend (2016) note that as a result of this relationship between rural and non-rural organizations, it is common for rural arts and cultural organizations to attempt to either replicate or adapt urban-centric practices into rural spaces, which they distinguish as being distinct if not oppositional to community centric practice.

This practice or expectation of adherence to a particular organizational approach can be placed within the understanding of what DiMaggio and Powell call "institutional isomorphism" (1983, p. 150), wherein organizations adopt similar processes and structures due to external influences. Such practices are not necessarily taken on intentionally or by choice: within the DiMaggio and Powell (1983) text, isomorphic practices labeled as "coercive" (p. 150) are imposed by external regulatory influences such as government legislation or funding requirements. Within the context of Scotland, the predominance of national development organization Creative Scotland as the primary public funding body for arts and culture means that many if not all funded organizations begin to have similar processes and structures to meet the regulation and evaluation requirements of such financial support. As a result, many organizations

who look to obtain or maintain similar funding might engage in "mimetic isomorphism" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 150), or an adoption of processes and practices of an organization viewed as successful by those experiencing a sense of precarity. Within the context of the heightened visibility of rural spaces, these themes are further amplified, as both illustrated and problematized within the Rural Arts Network Scotland.

The case of the rural arts network Scotland

The project

The aim of the Rural Arts Network Scotland was to enhance cultural participation and access to the arts and culture in rural and remote localities utilizing an action research methodology within the creation of a sustainable network of cultural organizations. The network sought to address three key issues identified through a pilot research session undertaken in the winter of 2020 by Queen Margaret University, Creative Scotland, and nine cultural organizations located or working with rural and remote communities. These three issues were: first (1), a perceived lack of understanding by funders and policymakers of the specificities of delivering creative and cultural work in rural and remote settings; second (2), rural-specific locational barriers to cultural participation due to transportation infrastructure, affordability, and hyperlocal priorities differing from those of the broader sector, and; third (3), high staff turnover as a result of limited opportunities for knowledge exchange, networking, and professional support and development in rural and remote areas. The pilot research participants determined that an optimal first step toward addressing these issues would be establishing processes of, and opportunities for, mutual knowledge exchange between rural organizations and workers themselves.

Methods: the proposal for a community of Practice

The action-based methodological approach to this project was largely framed by the nature of the problem, namely an identified lack of opportunities for sharing and learning between rural and remote organizations due to their geographical distance. As such, the project was oriented around active mechanisms for sharing and exchange between organizations from diverse rural and remote contexts around Scotland, and nurturing a Community of Practice.

The participating members of the Rural Art Network Scotland (RANS) were drawn from self-selecting cultural organizations of various sizes, shapes and structures, based around the country, in many diverse areas, explained in more depth below. It was clear from the pilot research that these organizations had shared issues related to transportation, housing, funding, and addressing broader sector priorities such as decolonization on the hyperlocal level. However, each rural organization's response to such issues were contextual to their particular rural communities. As such, any learnings to be shared would need to be contextual, and developing a universal 'solutions-focused' network would not be able to effectively address the particularities of each context. It was also very clear that whilst online options for exchange did exist such as The Touring Network

(a members-only digital forum for organizations engaged in touring live performance art in Scotland), few surveyed organizations reported utilizing these. RANS members engaged in other such online networks reported that such sites were useful to find practical information, but that the format did not facilitate sharing learning, expanding knowledge of other practices, or developing their organizations.

Similarly, organizational and social responses to the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that there were existing mechanisms to bring people together *via* online platforms. Indeed, over the course of the project RANS members indicated that when lockdown restrictions were implemented in Scotland, the rurally-situated organizations were well ahead of the curve of 'switching to digital' than many of their urban-based colleagues as they already relied on such forms of communication due to their socially and geographically isolated locations. In other words, due to their rural and remote contexts, video-calling and other such virtual management tools were already part of the management practices of many rural and remote arts organizations long before they became a necessity for those operating in the central regions. As such, the shift to a virtual world was not difficult, but nor was it preferred. Instead, there was a very clear push within both the pilot session and the first official meeting of the Rural Arts Network Scotland to prioritize meeting in-person, as it was felt that this was the most effective way to build relationships, learn about other organizations and practices, and facilitate shared reflection.

Therefore, in order to share learnings, a network was established based on developing a Community of Practice wherein mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoires become the mechanisms of development for the network itself and in turn the broader sector (Lave and Wenger 1991). The concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) is a theory of learning that centers "social coparticipation" (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 14), requiring three main elements: mutual engagement, which occurs when collaborative relationships are established and bring members together as a social entity; joint enterprise, sometimes referred to as the domain of community, which develops *via* social interactions where members create a shared understanding of what binds them together; and shared repertoire, wherein the community works together to produce a set of communal resources which are used in the pursuit of their joint social and professional activities and objectives. As such, nurturing a Community of Practice could help rural arts organizations to be able to work more effectively in addressing their localized problems, and thus be able to work more effectively with their communities. Importantly, it was felt by most participants of the pilot study that this Community of Practice could only be developed in the interpersonal, relational, and social in-person events, as such events were perceived to entrench relationships, allow space to expand ideas, and help build trust and empathy between participants. Over the course of the two years of the project, development of such a community was attempted through a series of network events held at rural locations in the North, South, East and West of Scotland.

The events

In order to facilitate and nurture the envisioned Community of Practice amongst rural arts organizations and practitioners in Scotland, a series of planned events were held.

Barring the online event, the events were held in a conference format over the course of three days each. These consisted of one day to allow for participant arrivals and informal gathering, one day of a formalized schedule of events concluding with an informal meal, and a final day for a last informal meal together before participants departed.

Following the obtaining of ethical approval from the Queen Margaret University Research Ethics Committee in January 2020, a pilot study was conducted at Alchemy Film and Arts in Hawick in February 2020, followed by the first official event held for one day online in July 2020. These two events aimed to gather insights around which participants could coalesce, the shared understandings drawn from their particular interests, aspirations, and contexts.

The second event took place at Lyth Arts Center in Caithness across two days in November 2021 and aimed to sense-check the findings that emerged from the pilot study and first event. In doing so, it addressed the previously identified shared issues and looked deeper into the practicalities, complexities, and nuances of community engagement, alternative economies, and evaluation within a rural context.

The third event was hosted by Atlas Arts in the Isle of Skye, during which participants added to, and deepened, the questions that had emerged from the previous events. The final event in Huntly, Aberdeenshire aimed to provide space for reflection on the network's activity, solidify its legacy, and explore a possible future beyond the project's funded context. Significantly, policymakers from Scottish Government and Creative Scotland attended this event, which provided dialogue and advocacy between participants and these external bodies.

The network: participant selection

Network participants were initially identified by the research team based on their previous engagements in the sector. These participants were invited directly to the pilot study based on their affiliation with rural and remotely situated cultural organizations across Scotland. This broad selection criteria allowed for the inclusion of cultural managers, practitioners, and researchers alike within the network, allowing for a range of experiences and knowledge that prioritized rural contexts. Following the initial round of invitations, a snowball method of recruitment was utilized whereby participants were encouraged to recommend other potential participants or forward event invitations directly. In this manner, the list of potential event attendees, to whom invitations were extended prior to each network event, grew organically based on existing informal networks within the sector. This was important due to the relational attention of the Network. Due to the nature of the events, participant consent regarding research participation was secured firstly through written correspondence *via* email and additionally through verbal means at events themselves.

Partners came from many parts of Scotland, and those that participated included: Alchemy Film and Arts (Hawick), Destination Tweed (Dumfries and Galloway), Scottish Sculpture Workshop (Lumsden), Connecting Threads/Southern Uplands Partnership (Scottish Borders), University of Glasgow (Glasgow), Mount Stuart Trust (Isle of Bute), Creative Aberdeenshire Network (Aberdeenshire), Community Arts Oban/Touring Network (Oban), Deveron Projects (Huntly), Atlas Arts (Skye), Culture Perth and Kinross

(Perthshire), In-Situ (Highlands), and Creative Strathaven (Strathaven). In addition to these organizational partners, five freelance artists and two freelance producers from various locations across Scotland participated within the network. While not directly part of the network, the attendance of the Head of Visual Art, the Head of Place (Creative Scotland), and the Head of Culture Strategy and Engagement (Scottish Government) to some events resulted in enhanced learning and understanding between sectoral agents.

Observations from the rural art network Scotland

Hierarchy of hosting

With the interest in meeting in-person and understanding that it would not be financially or physically feasible for many of the interested parties from rural arts organizations in Scotland to attend single-day events, and due to the interest in developing and enhancing relationships between members, it was decided that the network meetings would be hosted over multiple days. It was further deemed preferable by the network participants and partners to hold the events at other organizational sites so that previous, existing, and upcoming works by the hosting organizations might be examined or experienced by attendees as part of the event programming. Hosting partners were offered to view these events as opportunities to showcase their work to network attendees as new audiences, maximizing the benefits of attendance for both visitors and hosts alike. The combination of requirements meant the events would need an organizational host with the venue capacity for both network event programming and organizational programming, as well as the local connections or knowledge of local amenities to accommodate network partners for multiple days and nights.

The combination of hosting preferences and requirements ultimately narrowed down the options of potential event sites to larger or more established organizations with capacity to host in terms of staff numbers and space. Coincidentally, all event hosts were organizations who received long-term regular funding from Creative Scotland within the then-titled 'Regularly Funded Organizations' portfolio and were well-known within the sector due to their organizational longevity, which spanned between 10 and 40 years. This is not to suggest that the hosting organizations are *the* leaders of the rural arts sector in Scotland, but rather to emphasize the shared factors that the broader network partners identified as signaling organizational 'success'. Of particular note was the organizations' tangible 'seal of approval' from major funding bodies such as Creative Scotland. These factors emphasized an existing hierarchy of sorts within Scotland's rural arts sector between the larger and more established organizations as compared with smaller, less stable ones and individual freelance practitioners.

Geography is still an issue

Although every in-person RANS event was well attended throughout the two years, with four of the five events operating at capacity, most participants were only able to attend two sessions and only one single person was able to attend all five events. As a result, a significant portion of each gathering required a review of the conversations and findings from the previous events, which initially raised concerns that the Network

would be unable to progress within the discussed topics to create action points. However, it proved a useful reflection on the constancy of external pressures and time commitments for rural arts managers and practitioners. Indeed, the lack of consistent attendance emphasized the paradox at the very heart of the project: the shared contexts of isolation experienced by rural arts managers and practitioners that make it useful to bring them together being the very thing that makes it difficult to do so.

This observation is further highlighted by the regional representation at the events themselves. While the aim of the project was to involve rural arts organizations from throughout Scotland, the majority of attendees were from the Scottish mainland, with only two representatives from Shetland, Orkney, or the Outer Hebrides able to attend one different event each. The limited representation was a result of geographical distance and transportation infrastructure: while the project was able to cover transit costs for attendees, a greater barrier to participation proved to be the amount of time required to travel to and from the events. For example, in order to attend the final network event in Huntly, one participant based in the island of Bute on the west coast of Scotland undertook a nine-hour journey requiring use of a bus, a ferry, two trains, and car. For interested participants based in Shetland, the journey to Huntly would have taken nearly 15 h, and therefore impossible to justify for a three-day event. As such, a major finding within this project is that network or conference events aimed at arts organizations and practitioners situated in rural and remote contexts, such as RANS, should be held over several days to make travel worthwhile.

Attendees who were able to attend from the other areas of the Highlands flagged that the lack of participation from organizations based in the Islands in particular was indicative of a broader sentiment of disconnect between the rural and the remote within cultural organizations in Scotland. One aspect where this stated disconnect between rural and remote organizations played out was a difference in priorities for advocacy within RANS participation. Many participants from rural areas closer to the Central Belt expressed insecurity regarding an assumed lack of organizational awareness amongst funders and policy-makers as compared to their urban organizational counterparts. However, organizational visibility was explicitly noted as a low priority for more remote organizations: this was concisely stated by a participant who noted that many of the cultural organizations within the Highlands and Islands "*already have quite a high profile in the region*" and therefore were less concerned with visibility than expressed by more urban-adjacent peers.

The observed difference in visibility prioritization and impact suggests that due to differences in geographic contexts, rural cultural organizations often feel they are competing directly with urban cultural organizations for resources, while the isolated contexts of remotely situated organizations diminish the sense of competition with urban ones. One attendee further suggested that such a division between rural and remote cultural organizations did not originate from the arts and culture sector but rather was a result of broader government policies and initiatives that shaped their place-based contexts. Ironically, this observation extends the argument for the continuation of RANS, as it is clear that geographic distance still continues to inhibit exchange of ideas for cultural organizations who work with their local communities in rural and remote settings.

Searching for 'best' practice within good, better, and contemporary practices

A significant focus of discussions within both the formal and informal components of network events was a navigation around 'good' and 'best' management practice in relation to rural arts organizations. Of note within such discussions within the formal event settings in particular was that there were very few pragmatic or practical examples referred to or upheld as 'best' - rather, these conversations were predominantly framed in opposition to perceived expectations of practice based in urban areas. An event attendee framed this concisely in observing that "*traditionally there has been a sense that arts in urban places is somehow superior to arts in rural places. Advocacy could lead to mutual understanding and then to collaboration and sharing good practice*". Such iterations regarding the need for greater understanding around the differences between rural cultural management practices and urban ones were repeated frequently, but the differences in practice were not explicitly stated. Although over the course of network events participants became more confident in expressing an understanding of the innate value or competence within rural arts management and production, with the final RANS event involving a brief discussion of what urban arts managers might learn from rural arts organizations and practitioners, participants repeatedly raised a shared perception of not being considered or taken seriously by their non-rural counterparts and shared stakeholders. A participant summarized this sentiment as "*currently the urban seems to forget the rural and island, whereas the rural and island folk have to always consider the urban*".

Discussions around this topic often stemmed from information sharing within the formalized events, which was often very presentational and consisted of hosting organizations and guest speakers offering their stories as case studies to be learned from followed by guided group reflection. However, the informal elements of the events were central to information sharing: communal meals, post-event drinks, tea breaks, and walks both scheduled into the events program as well as between the hosting venue and attendee accommodations proved to be a valuable time for commiseration between participants and provided an understanding of rural arts practice that was less explicitly raised within the formal discursive events. Much of the information-exchange within the informal elements of events did not center the expectations of policymakers or funders or the reputational dynamics between rural and non-rural arts, but rather the navigation of intensely local relationships within rural and remote communities. Of note, every hosting organization at the time of their hosted event was in the process of, or had recent experiences with, a management handover, all involving the departure of the organization's founder. As such, a reoccurring conversational focus was the navigation of inherited relationships with area residents and local organizational stakeholders. While instigated within the framing of organizational transition as a result of a founder's departure, this topic proved relatable to newer organizations attempting to establish themselves within their local communities as well as with freelance practitioners who moved between different communities as part of artist residencies or fixed-term posts: given the precarious and migratory nature of work within the UK arts and culture sector due to increased reliance on short-term projects and contracts (Brook et al. 2020; Belfiore 2022), all Network participants were familiar with the experience of stepping into or inheriting an established relationship between local communities and cultural organizations.

The manifestation of a community of practice

A reoccurring topic within each event was a shared fear of the perceived inferiority of rural arts organizations and their practices as compared to urban and urban-adjacent counterparts. This was primarily communicated through a repeated narrative of not being listened to or understood by funders and policy makers, with commiserations over incompatibilities between the organizational practices and perceived expectations.

An element of this perceived inferior framing can be attributed to the location of the main offices of major policymakers and funders in Scotland, most of which are either based in or report to institutions within the central belt, Edinburgh and Glasgow in particular. It appeared that for many of the network participants there was a general anxiety of being left out or left behind in terms of economic, educational, and social opportunities, interests, and considerations. This seemed to be based in a fear of being misunderstood or held accountable for contextual realities of rural living that are less common or disruptive within non-rural environments, such as limitations to audience building due to small and/or dwindling population sizes and poor public transportation networks as compared to urban areas. However, once it became clear that many of the aspects of operating within the rural that contributed to these feelings of deficit were more about systemic barriers and issues than specifically arts-related aspects, participants were able to point to the elements they not only enjoyed about rural work, but also identified as advantageous to arts work specifically within rural contexts: namely, the intimate nature of rural living meaning arts organizations and practitioners are able to get know their target audience(s) both more quickly and on a deeper level, and that the impacts on local communities and shared residential contexts are more readily visible.

In discussing the highly relational nature of work within rural contexts, a participant made the comment that perhaps this type of work was predominant within all areas in Scotland given that "*Scotland is a rural country*". There is an argument to be made that those operating in rural and remote settings are in fact the dominant cultural form within Scotland given the country's relatively small size and low population density. Therefore, rural arts organizations and practitioners might engage within Scotland's broader arts and culture sector with confidence rather than a perceived place of deficit due to a lack of proximity to the urban. Indeed, many network participants repeatedly underlined that the practices relating to arts management and production stemming from rural contexts are innovative and relevant, and therefore critical, to the broader sector. Examples raised of practices that emerge within rural spaces out of necessity of responsiveness to local issues included the increasing focus on care practices within management; development of antiracism policies; and advocacy for and implementation of living wage support. Similarly, network participants noted that the creative and cultural work being produced in Scotland's rural organizationsorganisations was of high quality and relevance *because* of the context of the rural rather than in spite of it. With these considerations in mind, rural arts organizationsorganisations and practitioners could be framed as significant contributors to understandings of 'best practice' within urban contexts.

Not 'solutions-focused'

In establishing the validity and contributions of rural arts practice in terms of both management and production to the wider sector, network participants remained confident that the shared contexts of their rural places of work and residence were conditions of operation rather than issues that needed resolution. Therefore, in discussing the usefulness of knowledge-sharing networks such as RANS, it was determined that such spaces should not be 'solutions-focused'. In other words, attempts to 'fix' the aspects of rural arts work that differed from the non-rural would remove the unique aspects of rural arts work that make it innovative and relevant. As such, there was an expressed interest to reconfigure the thinking around such networks as places for sharing insights on the contexts of rural and remote work rather than sites for shaping these contexts to mirror those of urban environments.

The shift in understanding of both the inherent value within rural arts work and the role of sector networks signals the possibility of a similar shift across the sector, namely in the potential for a greater reliance on a Community of Practice amongst arts organizations and practitioners for validation and reassurance as opposed to relying on shared stakeholders such as Creative Scotland. This is not to suggest that major funders and policy-making bodies should not be looked to for guidance, but rather that given the enormous variation of organizational interests, approaches, and contexts that such bodies have to take into consideration within their governance and funding policies and approaches, they cannot be expected to be able to provide consistent logistical or indeed emotional support that is applicable to all contexts. However, a Community of Practice focused on the complex relational nature of arts work as it occurs within community-centric sites such as the rural and remote can be more responsive to the needs and interests of rural arts organizations and practitioners. In this way, the Rural Arts Network Scotland has revealed an interest in – and need for – cross-sector networking dedicated to relationship-building and support, as opposed to attempting to 'fix' the issues experienced within rural contexts.

Conclusion

Considering the insight into the dominance of rurality in Scotland in terms of both geography and the number of cultural organizations operating across rural and remote settings, development of this sector should be a pressing concern. A significant finding from this project in relation to this aim is twofold: firstly, it is clear that understanding between arts organizations operating in the rural can be developed by the facilitation of a Community of Practice through shared, hosted, in-person events. However, such events should be held over several days to make the travel worthwhile for attendees, in particular those from more remote areas. Secondly, knowledge-sharing networks and events such as RANS should not be 'solutions focused' sites for shaping rural practices and contexts, but rather places for sharing insights on the contexts of rural and remote work.

The described shift in understanding of both the inherent value within rural arts work and the role of sector networks signals the possibility of a similar shift across

the sector, namely in the potential for a greater reliance on a Community of Practice amongst arts organizations and practitioners for validation and reassurance as opposed to relying on shared stakeholders within policy and funding. This is not to suggest that major funders and policy-making bodies should not be looked to for guidance, but rather that given the enormous variation of organizational interests, approaches, and contexts that such bodies have to take into consideration within their governance and funding policies and approaches, they cannot be expected to be able to provide consistent logistical or indeed emotional support that is applicable to all contexts. However, a Community of Practice focused on the complex relational nature of arts work as it occurs within community-centric sites such as the rural and remote can be more responsive to the needs and interests of rural arts organizations and practitioners.

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