Adjusting Sensibilities: Researching Artistic Value 'on the edge'

(Keywords: multidisciplinary arts research, artistic methodology, sustainable cultural practice in rural remote contexts).

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Abstract

An understanding of the relationship between systems of production and systems of value in the visual arts is essential to the production of new sustainable approaches to creativity. Contexts for working situated 'on the margins' such as remote rural locations focus tensions between conflicting systems of value that require us to adjust our sensibilities. This paper traces these issues through an ongoing three year research project, On the Edge (OTE) (August 2001 - 4, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)). Key stages of generative metaphor, originally identified by Schön, are used as an analytical tool to reveal the process of developing the research methodology.

Introduction

In a recent published interview with the artist, Richard Wentworth, he recalls the image of Helen Sharman, the astronaut, looking back at Earth from her orbiting spacecraft, when she sees electric light leaking from the globe. She draws attention to how it visibly maps the world making clear who 'has' and who 'has not'. Europe glares with light. Africa is dark (Allen, 2001). In Scotland it is the central belt that shines with light, Northern Scotland is dark. The night time satellite image clearly illustrates cultures of influence which are located in centralized modes of organization.

This paper draws from the On the Edge research that tests the belief that it is possible to make and experience visual art *of quality* in remote/rural areas. The project has been developed partly in order to address a gap in arts provision in an underserved geographical area – Northern Scotland. The darkness frames a lack of infrastructure for the arts that currently does not allow artists and their audiences to come together effectively. The darkness is also symbolic of a sense of value – the assumption being that the significant space for arts development in professional terms is 'in the light'- areas of population density or urban metropolitan contexts.

This paper traces the development of our thinking from one way of perceiving this set of issues as polar opposites (light/dark, urban/rural, global/local, professional /community based) to constructing new stories and drawing on new metaphors that take these polar opposites into a shared mutually affective space. We will show how we have used the metaphor of 'home' to redraw the interrelationships between artist, audience and administrator /curator in response to the challenge of arts development in remote rural places. The paper argues that metaphors are key

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to exposing systems of value and their impact on systems of production in the practice of art. Metaphors shape what we do because they embody values and beliefs.

While metaphor helps us to see and interpret our world, Schön's 'generative metaphor' can act as a framework to guide our thinking and action as a result of new 'seeing' or 'imaging'. Used as a tool this generative metaphor has six key stages: 1. 'immersion', 2. 'problem setting as story telling', 3.'naming and framing', 4. 'moving beyond idea to action', 5. 'further questioning' and 6. 'restructuring or changing position'. Each stage overlaps with the next within a cyclical development (Schön,1993).

This paper is concerned with opening up our **understanding** of the creative process by using the tension between two systems of value as a spring board from which to move forward. We have taken the initial pragmatic problem of arts provision and infrastructure to a deeper level of questioning. We are, as Schön says, '*starting with a careful description and analysis of particular instances of intuitive inquiry'* that is itself '*empirically grounded'* (ibid p160).

We are eighteen months into the three year On the Edge research period. The paper focuses the developmental period of a programme of five experimental projects that will be realized between Spring 2003-4. This programme represents a crucial aspect of the research methodology and is supported by evaluation and critical contextual thinking.

Stage 1. Immersion

> *'Problems are not given. They are constructed by human beings in their attempts to make sense of complex and troubling situations'* (ibid p144).

The funding picture in Scotland clearly demonstrates a privileging of urban metropolitan areas over rural remote areas. A survey by the Scottish Arts Council in December 2002 on per capita spending on the arts last year reveals the following information; £111.07 per capita in Glasgow, £99.41 in Dundee and £89.74 in Edinburgh (i.e. the three centres that make up the central belt of Scotland). In Aberdeen the per capita spend was £ 23.89 and in Aberdeenshire the per capita spend was £5.74.

Over a period of immersion (1996 –2000) a number of individuals living and working in Northern Scotland came together because they had felt a frustration over the lack of contemporary arts experience in their localities. Crucially, these individuals believed that visual art research and their practices together could *in some way* change their situations positively. Consequently these individuals, representing arts and heritage organizations, education and professional art practice, formed the key partnerships that constitute the OTE Network[1]. These five partners constitute five experimental visual art projects (the OTE programme of projects).

It quickly became evident that transposing ways of working that worked in urban metropolitan contexts (the dominant model for contemporary visual arts practice) was not appropriate to remote rural contexts. The interrelationship between the players of artist, administrator/curator and audience needed to be rethought at a fundamental level. We were also aware that we were not alone in this process of questioning how visual art interacts with audience.[2] We were in a situation that was both *complex* and *troubling* in as far as it was not well understood and fraught with tensions of conflicting expectations. This can be seen in the two dominant paradigms for working in the visual arts; professional practice and community arts. Where professional practice characterizes itself through the notion of individualistic authorship, models of community arts subordinate individuality to shared experiences and exchange (e.g. of skills).

Although there has been much debate on the value of art and the question of how we go about determining this i.e. evaluation, this debate was largely taking place in relation to the role of art in terms of 'regeneration' or 'social inclusion' primarily in urban contexts[3]. Within these debates the function of contemporary art is often discussed in socio-economic and socio-political terms as that of a polarity between, on the one hand, art for art's sake, and art that serves a clear purpose e.g. social inclusion or regeneration (Fox (ed), 2002 and Warnock and Wallinger (eds), 2002). Viewed like this, in terms of accountability (e.g. spending public money) or in terms of power relations (e.g. institutional 'gatekeepers'), there is a danger of loosing sight of the qualitative values of art. What exactly constitutes 'quality' in art is rarely discussed in terms of art's connectedness to lived reality, and this discussion is relegated to the realm of aesthetics rather than taking place within practice itself.

We needed to construct some clear questions out of our understanding, experiences and discussions at this point. The questions needed to focus the contribution that remoteness and ruralness could make to these debates.[4] This period of immersion (1996 – 2000) therefore culminated in the AHRB research proposal.

The Research Questions
• What constitutes 'good practice' in the visual arts in rural remote areas? What is the intellectual justification for separating 'good practice' (i.e. process) from quality? How can judgements be made which take account of both elements?

• What are appropriate ways of determining the quality of artistic practice that take into account different cultures of value? On what basis do you include some cultures of value and exclude others?

• In what ways might new artistic criteria challenge established models and prompt new ways of working in the arts?

• How might the research approach (methodology) that views artistic value from a multi disciplinary perspective contribute to new thinking in cultural development?

These questions clearly position the research belief that the important function of visual art, as a form of cultural production, is fundamentally *to make meaning*. How could we know within the five experimental projects that this was happening? Understanding the worth of any endeavor is normally a process of understanding how well it has been carried out relative to professional codes of practice. It is also a process of understanding the quality of experience of the participants or audiences involved. While codes of practice and quality of experience are useful for judging the worth or otherwise of any human activity, *artistic* quality is in part a question of deciding at a fundamental level how a work can justify its production against different philosophical positions or value systems. How does it contribute to the canon or body of work that extends our experience of what is possible and believable as artistic expression? Who decides? What are the criteria?

The period of immersion had told us that what is interesting about encountering contradictory values is not the dialogue between polarities such as local and global, 'cutting edge' and traditional, *but the challenge that the dialogue presents to question our assumptions and adjust our sensibilities,* thereby evolving new ways of working.

To explore these issues the research consists of three interrelated activities:

• creative production
The Network and research team [5] started to prepare the programme of five distinctive experimental visual arts projects located within five communities throughout Northern Scotland. At this stage it was understood that the programme would directly address the research questions by being responsive to a sense of place and community

as well as taking into account the wider discourses within the professional art world. The experimental projects were to be an embodiment of our critical thinking to date.

• evaluation

The Network undertook to participate in a series of workshops running in parallel with the project development and implementation stages to clarify thinking on the issue of the value of visual art as a shared process of reflection and to identify methods and criteria of evaluation[6]. The workshops are also a mechanism for sharing experiences and questions – a culture in miniature that could support and intensify the experience of project development.

The research team identified mechanisms for consulting wider expertise by hosting 'gatherings'. These 'gatherings' are round table discussions addressing a particular project e.g. festivals, commissioning. Here key national and international experts from different fields, together with the local representatives and participants of the project are invited to contribute on the basis of their specific expertise. (see Figure 1: *OTE Network*).

• critical/contextual thinking

The research team undertook to develop an overview of the context of ideas in which the inquiry could be positioned, in particular into the interrelationship between existing systems of production and systems of value and their related metaphors

Stage 2. Problem setting as story telling

> *A situation may begin by seeming complex, uncertain, indeterminate. If we can once see it in terms of a normative dualism such as health/ disease or nature/artifice, then we know in which direction to move* (Schön, 1996 p148)

The dualisms we had experienced and established as an initial framework for thinking was those of **urban** versus **rural** ways of working in the visual arts, **local** and **global**; **community** and **professional** ways of working. These dualisms, though limited and artificial, were important because they enabled us to begin to problematize the complexity of our situation. The dualisms in effect tells two quite different stories that are uncomfortable in their relationship to each other.

The urban infrastructure for the arts has tended to revolve around gallery, museum and increasingly public art practices. The gallery experience and urban forms of public art, including performance based 'interventions', are largely dependent upon anonymity between the artist and his/her audience. The roles of artist, curator, administrator, critic and even audience are made up of specialist interest groups. Each individual within the professional art arena is associated with one role or another but rarely with more than one. Careers and projects are carefully constructed in these specialist terms.

In contrast in rural remote locations although the same roles are at play as in urban contexts of artist, administrator, audience (more often community), these rarely shake down in quite such neat professionalized terms. Individuals take on more than one 'hat' in the process of making something happen. Audiences are not specialist interest groups but an aggregate. The artist may administrate and curate a project at the same time as making the artwork. Ideas and projects emerge from individuals but rarely take hold until they become part of a shared process of arriving at a course of action. The success of a project is highly dependent upon people becoming involved as participants, not observers or 'consumers'. Participants very often have a number of 'hats' or skills, to lend to the situation, and their involvement is crucial to the artwork or event happening at all.

What is important about these two different 'stories' of urban and rural ways of working is their perception of each other- on the one hand the non professionalized world views its professionalized counter part as élitist, sophisticated, risk taking but detached from everyday 'lay' experience. On the other, the world of professionalized 'urbane' approaches reads its rural remote counterpart as amateur, less risk taking and less refined in artistic terms because of needing to communicate clearly to a 'lay' public that is also participant. The lack of explicit articulation of values attached to each representation forces the stereotypes to perpetuate 'silently'. Each world acts in autonomous organizational modes, with distinctive beliefs and expectations.

The differences experienced in the process of developing the OTE programme were uncomfortable to the point of requiring the participants to reposition themselves. The repositioning takes place slowly through extensive dialogue resulting in the development period for the programme taking far longer and becoming far richer than we had originally anticipated.

Stage 3. Naming and framing – the development of metaphor

> *Each story constructs its view of social reality through a complementary process of naming and framing. Things are selected for attention and named in such a way as to fit the frame…..a few salient features and relations from what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex reality…. They describe what is wrong with the present situation in such a way as to set the direction for its future transformation* (Schön, p 146-7).

Institutions of visual art in urban contexts are framed by metaphors such as the 'temple' (extension to Tate Britain, London) or the 'factory' (Baltic, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear). These metaphors give clear indications of how we as audiences and as art producers might relate to each institution. The following examples will help to demonstrate this point.

In his introduction to a series of essays on the ideology of the gallery space, Thomas McEvilley, notes the parallels between the institution of the gallery and that of a medieval church:

> *'The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light…..The art is free, as the saying used to go, "to take its own life". The purpose of such as setting is not unlike the purpose of religious buildings – the artworks, like religious verities, are to appear "untouched by time", and its vicissitudes'.* (O'Docherty, 1986 p 7)

In the discussions leading up to the Baltic contemporary art development in Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, the director, Sune Norgren, caricatures the role of the curator:

> *'There's no use having curators if they're not part of the creative process….most of the artists that you work with have a vision and it is your work to try to come as close as possible to that vision….it was very much me as an individual. I saw myself very much as a dictator.' (*Hiller, 2000 pp 35-36)

These representations clearly frame art institutions as centres of power supporting individuals who are singled out as visionary. The distancing and need for reverence between creator and audience is resonant within the fabric of the buildings. This distance articulates a space between active artistic producers on the one hand, juxtaposed with passive audiences who 'consume' or 'revere' once the production is complete.

It became important to represent our emergent and distinctive 'method of production' in such a way that this representation could speak as clearly and eloquently as the established institutional metaphors. We needed to draw from both available paradigms, professional and community based, in the construction of a new one.

We started to become aware of the key differences between rural ways of life and urban, metropolitan ways. This initially revealed an important quality of **relationship**. Within rural ways of life a person can be known for who they are first and foremost, and secondly for what they do in terms of work. **The 'knowing' is defined by relationship** between people rather than by function within a system of production.

There seemed to be a synergy between this and discourses in an around networked culture using new technologies. Lyotard (1984) locates the individual as a nodal point within multiple networks, some of which are 'real' within geographical places and many of which are 'virtual' and traverse geographies. 'Knowing' within this postmodern paradigm is also defined by relationship and not by function within a discrete system of production.

These observations focused by, but not exclusive to, ways of living in remote rural areas provided the On the Edge Project with clues to a way forward. By thinking of the individual artist, administrator or community/audience member as individual centres located in relationship to each other within a networking structure, we were able to understand the quality of relationship as reciprocal and not hierarchical. The network becomes a vehicle for learning and exchange. Mutual interest or the desire to make a difference becomes the driving force.

From this point we needed to understand a new relationship between artist and audience based on qualities of closeness, not distance. This issue is the key focus of one of the two studentships attached to the AHRB grant.[7]

In parallel, the literature offers *a few salient features and relations from what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly complex reality*. Home in its original sense means 'the centre' (Berger 1984). Home' is the smallest economic unit, the site of self organization and self management on which economics are founded. The root eco or the greek 'oiko' means 'home' (Jacobs, 2000). 'Home' focuses the interdependency between individuals, their state of relationship. It is the site of our most intimate and intense relationships, both positive and negative. 'Home' is an entity by which an individual negotiates a sense of self and a sense of values. 'Home' is about private and public life (Morley, 2000, Ryczynsci, 1997, Attfield, 2000). In material culture, 'Home' is about choice (or lack of choice) and spatial arrangement likened to the process of making art (Lefebvre, 1996 in Attfield p157).

Stage 4. Moving beyond idea to action

> *Through the process of naming and framing, the stories make....the.... leap from data to recommendations, from facts to values, from 'is' to 'ought'... (they) make it seem graceful, compelling, even obvious (ibid p 147.)*

In order to address the issues of value defined within the research questions, the programme of five experimental projects needed to challenge received values. The *obvious, even compelling value* that centredness revealed was the need to grow the project from within local interest and issues, rather than impose authored works. Each partner in the Network was invited to put forward a project idea based on an important aspect of local culture. These became the foundations of each of the five projects which include marginal rural land in a 19th Century planned village in Lumsden ('The Field'), a 'sense of place' and 'belonging' in Fraserburgh ('Virtual Brochers), a local autumn festival in Huntly ('Tattiebogle'), traditional knitting and lace making in Shetland ('Langerin') and tempera painted ceilings of 16th century in Banffshire ('Celestial Ceiling').

Each project has gathered together local participants (Community Support Groups) to intensify and enrich the exploration of the issue and to transform i.e. affect change in our understanding of the project's potential. For example in 'The Field' project (project partner Scottish Sculpture Workshop), vernacular or traditional attitudes to land and landownership is drawn from discussions with the inhabitants of the village Lumsden. This is a crucial part of the process of what the artistic outcome will be i.e. opening up the potentialities for marginal rural land use. The artist's brief, in this case, is not focused by 'product' per se, but by using art as 'a process of value finding' (Lacy, 1995, p 30). (The output is likely to be an articulation of the findings, e.g. a publication).

The long process of sustained dialogue within the OTE Network and its activities has been crucial in constructing an identity through a shared sense of values**.** Workshop III (October 2002) was a seminal point where the specific quality of the discursive space became clear. The OTE centre is considered 'virtual' where research and practice come together in order to understand how art projects come into being. This understanding reveals the push and pull of different individual values and how these shape the final project description (aims, objectives, indicators and so on). It defines how different individuals 'own' the project in different ways. It reveals the tensions experienced between the culture of research and the pressures of managing a process within the 'real world'. This coming together represents a willingness to bring to the shared activity, the values and experiences that each sector have to offer. Through the experience of making something new i.e. realizing the five projects, each participant is demonstrating a preparedness to question their own assumptions. The quality of shared space, in particular its capacity to affect sensibilities and influence production, is described by Deleuze and Guattari as 'immanent' (Goodchild, 1996). The naming of this process of mutual influence is useful in as far as it reveals the learning process that is taking place between the partners and the researchers and the consequent depth of the projects. (see Figure 2. Immanence – a quality of discursive space).

The crystallization of thought is perhaps best demonstrated by the outcome of Workshop III where we identified key criteria of evaluation of artistic quality. These are; 'Technical Competence', 'Connection with Audience', 'Capacity to Move', 'Integrity of Conception and Production' and 'Thought Provoking and Resonant'.

At this workshop the clarity of values was drawn out **by recognising qualities** using 'Home' as metaphor. 'Home' generated thoughts and ways that were distinctive and different from what had gone before.

Figure 2. Immanence – a quality of shared space

Stage 5. Further questioning

> *Once we have constructed a generative metaphor, once we have concluded that in this story we are seeing A as B, then we can explore and reflect upon similarities and differences between A and B. In so doing we draw upon a repertoire of additional ways of perceiving and understanding both A and B (ibid p 149).*

In the research process we experienced tensions between individuals and their expectations and perceptions of the projects. This was a direct consequence of bringing potentially conflicting systems of value into the same space. Situations of tension arise in particular where different cultures of value cross paths. A creative methodology evolved in an urban metropolitan context cannot easily be applied to a local vernacular issue unless trust is established within a level playing field where individuals' experience is valued as equivalent but different. Local cultures need to demonstrate a preparedness to embrace new ways that are different from their own, at the level of expectation and at the level of execution. Urban professionalized ways need to be questioned in the

light of the essential role of volunteering in rural contexts. Tensions are an inevitable part of forming new creative responses by 'adjusting sensibilities', part of being present alongside others and of being influenced and affected by them.

In this sense 'Home' defines its opposite, homelessness. To concretize 'home' as an embodiment of fixed values 'privacy, security, family, intimacy, comfort and control' (Putman in Morley, 2000 p) can engage difficult issues such as the lack of preparedness to engage with the 'other'. 'Home' can mean 'Heimat', the nation state defined as such to exclude others. There is a tension between acknowledging shared values and excluding the values of others. It is important to locate such tensions at the centre of thinking about value and not at its margins. 'Home' and 'homelessness' are part of each other within human experience.

The unknown becomes a threshold or 'liminal' space between 'home' and the world beyond. 'It is neither here nor there' (Palmer, 2002). It is within liminality, rather than certainty, that new ideas and thoughts 'become' in the sense of being newly created (Turner, 1988)

Stage 6. Restructuring / changing position

> *Subsequently the inquirers may construct new models of the situation from the stories they have told. Their new co-ordinated descriptions may then select out fixed properties which this particular situation shares with others…(Schon, p159)*

The construction of new visual art models may be best demonstrated through the development of thinking and its transformative effect on each project. In this paper we illustrate how the metaphor 'home' has influenced the thinking on an aspect of one of the five projects.

• The 'Celestial Ceiling' project' (project with partner Duff House) offered the apparently straight forward problem of replacing a 16th century painted ceiling destroyed by fire, by its 21st century equivalent and this would be executed by an established painter. This simple reading of the project was transformed by focusing on the fact that the space which the ceiling enclosed was a private home; A home of a very different patron from that of the 16th century. At the 'gathering' pertinent issues of commissioning and built heritage were discussed but central to the 'expert' discussion were the personal values of the patron and current occupier. Considerations of public/private 'thresholds' were implicit; for example private space/public access, continuity of built heritage, relationship between patron and artist. The values considered important, by a 'new' patron in relation to home, family and external relationships were the sensibilities of 'play' and 'spontaneity'. These specific values, once drawn out through conversation, informed the artist's brief. The 'gathering' facilitated a process of not simply arriving at an understanding (i.e. what the requirements of the brief should be), but that of *arriving at meaning* i.e. the specific functionality of art arrived at by the players involved here.

Conclusion

The meta level of thinking on the research as a process has identified the use of metaphor as a way of seeing relative positions of value and related systems of production. Schön has given us a cogent set of steps that enable us to reveal aspects of process and inform new ones.

An understanding of metaphor, in particular metaphors that generate action, is key to revealing the relationship between production and value in cultures of difference, such as urban/rural. The metaphor of 'home' has enabled

us to redraw the interrelationships between artist, artwork and 'audience' or 'community' so that the projects carry particular qualities. They are centred in 'people' and their interests, not labeled as either community or audience. They rely on relationships rather than institutional hierarchies, on dialogue rather than procedure, on 'homes' rather than 'temples', on participation rather than spectatorship. At the same time each project has the clear objective to achieve high quality art production, recognized as such by the professional sector as well as 'on the ground'. 'Home' speaks to each project in distinctive ways and on different levels.

The 'gatherings', one of the methods used, are instances where thinking occurs in a mutually affective space. This is the new centre. Differences are not expelled onto the margins, but are exchanged within the space. In this context art is a value finding process. The 'gatherings' and the Network represent a 'community of interpretation' where value is not fixed or given. It emerges through 'conversational realities', 'the messy, contingent communicability that meshes together a community'. (Bhaba in Jacobs 1998).

The final output of the research, due to be completed in August 2004, will be the publication of a 'toolkit'. This 'toolkit' will be pragmatic and aesthetic tool for self organisation and self determination of the arts in culture at a local level.

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1 The Network partners comprise Scottish Sculpture Workshop (SSW), Lumsden Aberdeenshire; Museum of Scottish Lighthouses (MSL), Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire; Deveron Arts (DA), Huntly, Aberdeenshire; Shetland College Textile and Design Department (SC), Lerwick, Shetland; Duff House (DH), Banff, Aberdeenshire. These five are working in co-operation with Gray's School of Art, the Robert Gordon University (OTE Research Team), François Matarasso of Comedia, Scottish Arts Council and Aberdeenshire Council Arts Team.

2 The discourse developed in the States by artists, curators and critics place the emphasis on the changing role of the artist by focusing on the relationship between the artist and audience, particularly the processes of exchange and reciprocity. They argue for the need to evaluate art from multidisciplinary perspectives, including the artist's own voice and belief system (Lacy, 1995; Lippard, 1997; Finkelpearl, 2001, Jacobs, M. J., 1998, 2001). The OTE project grapples with a similar process-orientated approach as that articulated by Lacy in the gap between 'both social and aesthetic traditions' (Lacy, 1995 p183 – 4). The OTE research seeks to take this discourse forward by constructing new approaches that are not artist centred. The OTE research investigates the culture of art production by bringing together artist with administrator/curator and audience within an activity that is defined by both production and evaluation.

3 Matarasso, F. *Use or Ornament* published by Comedia, (1997) is one of a number of key texts on the evaluation of participation in the arts by non professionals.

4 At this stage of the research we hosted a conference, *The On the Edge Conference*, May 2000, by drawing on a number of rural/remote models for working in the arts across Northern Europe. The conference articulated a Europe wide platform for debate through eleven case studies from across the arts representing different ways of developing the arts in remote rural places. Within the conference we examined the benefit of the arts from social, economic and cultural perspectives. The conference facilitator Matarasso, of Comedia Cultural Policy Research, drew out nine principles for successful www.ontheedgeconference.org).

5 The OTE research team includes Professor Carole Gray, project co-ordinator; Dr Anne Douglas, principal researcher, Heather Delday, Ph.D. student, Claudia Zeiske, Ph.D. student

6 These take place every spring and autumn and are facilitated by the co-researcher on the project François Matarasso of Comedia Cultural Policy Research.

7 Heather Delday's Ph.D. project (2001-) is investigating a close relationship between artist, artwork and audience by developing and evaluating her own fine art practice within this construct. The second studentship attached to the OTE research (Claudia Zeiske) is looking at the economic impact of the OTE program.

Biographies

Dr **Anne Douglas** is the principal researcher on the On the Edge research project. Her research interests include developing sustainable contemporary practice from a research base through the framing and co-ordinating of focused projects that are responsive to specific places and cultures. Her artistic practice has undergone a transition from 'maker of objects' to 'maker of situations'. These interests are informed from two perspectives. Douglas' first degree was in anthropology with a specific interest in the rituals of story telling and performance. She then studied sculpture and has practised extensively in both gallery and public art arenas in Britain and Europe. Her PhD 'Sculpture as Improvisation' (1992), Sunderland University, was an articulation of creative practice as a form of improvisation viewed through John Cage's essay Composition as Process (MIT Press, 1961) and tested in relation to her own production of sculpture.

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Heather Delday worked for over ten years as a designer, primarily for the Scottish Gaelic community, based on the Isle of Lewis (Outer Hebrides). She extended professional practice by conducting a study into the parameters and potentials of designing multilingual texts (unpublished MPhil, Robert Gordon University, 1996). In 2000 Delday undertook an MA study focused on issues around identity and replication. The studio work led to a fruitful dialogue between the artist and consultant geneticists (unpublished MA thesis, Gray's School of Art, 2001). This work continues into the PhD study. The methodology is that of structuring dialogue across two disciplines, fine art and genetics, through visual methodologies such as drawing, photography and construction as central to the process. Delday's research informs the larger OTE project in terms of how an artist negotiates and situates practice in a rural/remote context (Inverurie, Aberdeenshire) and in particular how the artist constructs and understands a close relationship between the artist and 'audience' (PhD Gray's School of Art, 2001-).

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