



Artists as workers in the rural; precarious livelihoods, sustaining rural futures

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Abstract

This paper explores rural-based artists' experiences of achieving sustainable livelihoods in rural localities as part of emerging discussions about the significance of culture and the cultural economy for rural development and sustainability. It applies Throsby's (1992) categorization of artists based on their employment conditions: a) 'initial creative artists, i.e. writers, visual artists, craftspeople, composers, and b) performing artists (actors, dancers, musicians)' (p.201-202). Based on semi-structured interviews with artists in Ireland, Wales and North East England, and drawing on relational understandings of rurality, it examines how livelihood precariousness in the rural is shaped by a) dominant creative economy policy and institutional narratives that promote the rural creative economy as a development opportunity for the rural; b) challenges to artists' professional identities and their efforts to resisting exploitation and devaluation of their creative labour; c) the ways in which local rural communities themselves recognize and support artists' skills and labour as a social, cultural and economic resource that contributes to rural sustainability.

Keywords: relational rural, artists, professional, workers, culture, precariousness, precarity, creative economy, sustainability

1. Introduction – the new cultural economy

The phenomenon of the new cultural economy – exploiting the commercial potential of culture in an era of globalization and information technology (Garnham, 1987, 1995; Pratt, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2008; Collins and Cunningham 2017) forms part of the backdrop to contemporary perceptions of art and culture in rural development and sustainability in the developed world. Since the early 1980s there has been sustained political interest in culture's potential to generate innovative forms of economic growth over more traditional arts- and heritage-base policies (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2000, 2002;

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Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005). The concept has attracted a range of critiques however for the impact of neoliberal policies that have tended to underpin it, complicating understandings of culture where cultural activity is now as much a part of political and economic (i.e. market-based) discourses as aesthetic ones (see also Garnham, 1987). Gibson and Kong (2005) for instance identify the influence of 'normative cultural economy' (549) perspectives – the normalization and generalization of market-led 'brands' (ibid.) of cultural economy such as Florida's (2000)' creative cities'. They argue that these perspectives tend to exclude more critical interpretations of the ways in which culture and creativity (not just in economic but also in non-productive and non-commodified ways) emerge as more complex components of specific local development, that are less likely to attract policy support. Pointing to an increasingly unclear understanding of what the object of cultural industries policies should be, Pratt (2005) contends that the challenge for public policy in supporting the cultural sector lies in the increasingly 'hybrid nature of cultural production' (31), particularly for cultural policy which spans both the creative industries as largely (but not exclusively) profit-making entities, and the cultural sector that is largely (but also not exclusively) not for profit.

2. The new rural development paradigm

Contemporary discussions on the significance of the arts and culture for rural development are also reflective of a turn in development thinking in the developed world – in this case the new rural development paradigm. This emphasises a holistic approach to revitalizing the rural, not just the agricultural or economic aspects of it (van der Ploeg et al. 2008). Here, the vision is that rural localities' unique stores of territorial capital should be developed in ways that respect sustainability principles which are applied across interdependent economic, environmental and social spheres (Marsden, 2003; Sonnino et al. 2008). Rural development is therefore understood as a myriad of contrasting and potentially competing development trajectories that unfold in specific places (which each have their unique histories, conditions and dynamics) via complex webs of interaction that are multi-actor and multi-scalar. A key aim is to add and retain value for economies and livelihoods at the local level (ibid.), whilst broadening the local economic activity base. The emphasis is on avoiding highly-regulated, market-based mainstream policies and strategies whose fragmented sectoral approach has tended to constrain actors from engaging directly

with locally-based development challenges (Marsden, 2006). Here, actors committed to alternative rural development pathways must construct new 'holistic connections' from within and external to the local (211) that constitute new assemblages of knowledge, information, decision-making structures and development practices that emerge in spatially contingent ways.

3. The place of the arts in rural development and sustainability

The potential of the arts to contribute to rural development under such conditions, and the significance of the rural as a site for cultural and creative work has been a focus for international academic critique for some time, with several key perspectives emerging on the specificity of the rural context in this regard. Representation and commodification of rural culture is one such critique (Halfacree, 2004; Urry, 1995; van der Ploeg et al. 2008). Here, the rural imagination is cultivated as a form of 'cultural desire' that predominantly reflects the needs of the capitalist market place (Halfacree, 2004; Urry, 1995). The importance of rurality as a source of inspiration (symbolically or functionally) is another aspect in terms of how it feeds into cultural and creative endeavours from an artistic standpoint (Markusen, 2007; Drake, 2003; Bunting and Mitchell, 2001). These dimensions of rurality would seem to hold the promise of specifically rural place-based opportunities for both cultural and rural development (Luckman, 2012). However, Bell and Jayne (2010) maintain for example that forms of policy support for culture have reflected narrowly-defined, urban-centric understandings of culture as a resource for rural sustainability, further delimited by new cultural economy discourses of innovation, entrepreneurship and regeneration; i.e. reflecting little actual understanding of how art and artists operate in and contribute to specific place-based forms of rural sustainability (Anwar McHenry, 2011, Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016, 2017; Scott et al. 2016). Gibson and Kong (2005) also highlight the strong urban-centred nature of cultural economy ideas, particularly where achieving their development potential presume upon such conditions as access to city-scale infrastructure, facilities, training, professional associations and other economies of scale. Bunting and Mitchell (2001) contend that the relative absence of these from the rural has also led to dominant association with artists and the urban. They describe the situation of artists' 'economic exigency' (ibid. 282) in marginalized rural places, i.e. art being produced

out of economic need, whereby the professional status of the artist becomes of secondary relevance to selling art or to including the arts in local economic development strategies.

Artists' relative significance as a distinct group is cited with increasing frequency as part of rural sustainability discourses. Markusen (2007), for example, outlines how artists drive growth in local rural economies via activities generated not just through their own production and sale of art, but also through the establishment of facilities such as artists' centres, artists' workspaces and performing arts facilities. Using consumption base theory, she thus describes artists as catalysts for new and increased local and external expenditure. She refers furthermore to the range of non-economic benefits that artists contribute to their localities as rural residents who take part in and invigorate community life through initiating community arts activities and events (see also Markusen and Schrock, 2006). Duxbury and Campbell (2011) similarly emphasise the capacity of the arts to provide sustainability to rural places and communities experiencing rural restructuring and change; this occurs through their initiation of new economic activities connected to the production of art, as well as social and cultural activities as part of community-engaged art that enhance local social and cultural capital (Dunphy, 2009; Anwar McHenry, 2011; Luckman, 2012).

The general acceptance of the arts as contributing positively to society and community is not always enhanced by environments or conditions to support artists in their professional or institutional status. Jackson's (2004) national study of US artists establishes an analytical framework along six dimensions that provide more or less supportive places for artists: *Validation* – assigning value to what artists do; *Demands/Markets* – for artists' outputs and commensurate financial compensation; *Material Supports* – access to financial and physical resources including awards, employment, materials; *Training and Professional Development* – conventional and lifelong learning; *Communities/Networks* – inward to other artists, and outward to non-artists; *Information* – data sources about and for artists (45). For each of these categories, Jackson (2004) found that artists struggled to exert agency in having their work validated, to access sufficient resources, or to sustain networks that would articulate their needs at institutional levels. Relyea (2015) also raises concerns about these issues in the era of the cultural economy, particularly artists' own sense of and expectations for themselves arising out of their labour, professional status, social practices and notion of

what constitutes the 'public'. Like Jackson (2004) he sees these challenges emerging from the ways that art becomes valued and how its devaluation can be resisted (see also Roberts and Wright, 2004) when ideas on what constitutes art are constantly changing with policy discourses aligned to contemporary cultural economy perspectives. In this regard, Relyea (2015) refers to the increasingly changed focus of the art experience for the artist, away from the object of the art to the artist's subjective position in producing it: '...the independent [artist] goes from being a person with a core, an essence, to being somebody who is performative, who is on-demand and just-in-time, who is in constant feedback with her or his specific context from one moment to the next' (4).

The above insights indicate the potential for art to contribute to rural economic development, but through a more holistic notion of sustainability; one that also has regard to artists' livelihoods which includes acknowledging and sustaining their professional identities and enabling them to achieve a certain quality of life in the rural as part of its development discourses and strategies. Here, certain elements of sustainable rural livelihoods perspectives (used predominantly in developing countries' rural development and poverty reduction research) as developed by authors such as Chambers and Conway (1992), Scoones (1998, 2009), Bebbington (1999) and Ellis (2000) provide a helpful framework to understand how rural development perspectives actually envisage sustainable outcomes at the level of the individual or household. Scoones' (1998) sustainable rural livelihoods analytical framework interprets the success or otherwise of rural livelihoods in relation to the given contexts, resources, strategies, outcomes and institutional processes that mediate them. These are enacted across what Bebbington (1999) identifies as three distinct activity domains: '...instrumental action (making a living), hermeneutic action (making living meaningful) and emancipatory action (challenging the structures under which one makes a living) (2022), highlighting both the material and social dimensions of livelihood.

This discussion develops two main strands as a framework for critiquing the place of artists in the rural. First, it acknowledges the contested nature of art and its value under varying conditions and circumstances, taking place within the similarly negotiated nature of rural space and place through which the relevance of art becomes manifest. It draws on relational understandings of rurality as a means to examine received notions of artists'

livelihoods and contributions to rural development and sustainability. Second, it draws on the concept of precariousness to advance these ideas on the actual contribution of artists to the rural; to explore certain dominant narratives of artists' livelihoods and identities and how notions of precariousness are implicit in the representation of artists in the rural. By implication it is concerned with notions of responsibility (Massey, 2004a) and ethics (McDowell, 2004) in the formulation of discourses around artists' identities in the rural, and with Gibson-Graham's (2002) ideas on 'resubjectivation' (30) - the potential to create new political and economic subjects to confront the power of the global to shape the local under hegemonic forces of capitalism. In this regard, it invokes Gill and Pratt's (2008) idea of the artist embracing a 'new political subjectivity' (3) – the notion of *precarity* – as both a political entity and a way of being, reflecting a consciousness on the one hand of their labour status and its inherent insecurity under predominant forms of cultural economy, and on the other hand of the supposed scope to challenge this status through the promotion of alternative narratives about the arts and its place in rural development.

The discussion is based on a series of interviews conducted with artists living in west and north-west Ireland, north-east England and in Ceredigion, Wales, as well as interviews with other individuals from these locations and outside them who work in support and facilitation roles to enhance and sustain cultural work in the rural. The categorizations for artist used are drawn from Throsby (1992), who studied the phenomenon of the artist as worker. Here, he proposed two groups of artists based on their employment conditions; a) 'initial creative artists, i.e. writers, visual artists, craftspeople, composers) and b) performing artists (actors, dancers, musicians) (p.201-202). It also uses draws on a similar categorization devised by Markusen and Schrock (2006) of artists who self-identify as such, and who 'engage in their art work as their major occupation' (1665). For convenience, the terms 'art' and 'art work' are used to describe their collective work, rather than differentiating between different artists' specific activities. The discussion concludes with some main reflections on the possibilities to envisage alternative approaches to developing the cultural economy in rural contexts, in the light of artists' experiences in securing sustainable livelihoods.

4. Cultural labour – precariousness, political subjectivities

An increasingly prevalent aspect to the creative economy especially under contemporary neoliberal capitalism is employment precariousness as a feature of artists' and cultural workers' livelihoods (Christopherson, 2008; Gill and Pratt, 2008). The term precariousness has been applied to the experience of uncertainty and insecurity that comes with flexible labour practices and arrangements that include temporary and seasonal work, subcontracting, freelancing, piece-work, project-based work, home-work and informal work. Notwithstanding artists' and cultural workers' need to realise their talents under suitably creative and flexible conditions, Neilson and Rossiter (2005) nevertheless identify such workers' precarious employment experiences as reflective of the oppressive aspects of post-Fordist capitalism. Christopherson (2008) similarly asserts that the precariousness issue lies with the industry context in which creative work becomes produced. For example, Neff et al. (2005) describe the normalising of risk-taking as an inherent aspect of cultural labour, shaping workers identities, behaviours and expectations about flexible working. This 'profit-oriented risk' (ibid. 310) becomes part of discourses of entrepreneurial endeavour, competitive advantage and career success, but with the risk of market failure similarly shifted onto the individual worker. Heightened risk also emanates from what Power and Scott (2011) describe as the unique characteristics of the cultural economy – that the value of its products is linked to their symbolic content and novelty, with uncertainty of demand meaning that the usual market relations between producer and consumer do not apply. Relations of production often operate within complex value chains, negotiated under highly unequal power arrangements (Caves, 2000; 2003). Popular notions of the creative worker getting by on the strength of job satisfaction are countered with accounts of self-exploitation, personal and economic trade-offs, and other 'unemancipative' forms of 'cultural coping' (Garnham, 1995, 69).

The literature provides extensive accounts of the unique and precarious situation of artists as workers (Throsby 1992, 1994, 2001; Menger 2001, 2006; Towse, 2006). Artists manage the occupational risk of low pay for art work and contingent employment by turning to arts-related or non-arts work to sustain their incomes. Artists are therefore seen as supplying two labour markets - art and non-art - and deriving earnings from each (Throsby, 1992). The non-monetary rewards from a career in arts, which have been called 'psychic income' (Menger, 2006, 21), have been described as job satisfaction from being able to exercise

personal autonomy, having varied work with a low level of routine, and a high degree of social recognition if successful (reflective of Bebbington's (1999) notion of 'hermeneutic action'). However, the 'shadow price' (Menger, 2006, 21) of these benefits is a lower income, spells of unemployment, and/or the need to take alternative intermittent and potentially less skilled and less rewarding employment. This gap in income between artists and other workers has also been interpreted by Withers (1985, in Towse, 2006, 8) as 'the subsidy of artists to the arts'. Ursell (2000) points to this fact that artists themselves engage in voluntary processes of self-exploitation or 'self-commodification' (807), seeking to build their reputations and improve employment chances.

A specific focus on workers' changing subjectivities arising out of these alterations to working life under contemporary neoliberal capitalism has been captured by the notion of precarity, or '*précarité*' (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008). *Précarité* is summarised by Neilson and Rossiter (2005) as the basis for a multi-class social movement organised throughout Europe in the early 2000s to draw attention to the growing pervasiveness of precarious work through these increasingly prevalent forms of labour organisation. From a wider social justice perspective, Neilson and Rossiter (2005) cite the definition of precarity by Alex Foti (2004, np): ...'being unable to plan one's time, being a worker on call where your life and time is determined by external forces', i.e. where it is not possible to anticipate a future. Precarity can also relate to those labour experiences which include the freedom to chart a path that is not constrained by traditional state-backed or Fordist forms of labour organisation (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005) Gill and Pratt (2008) emphasise this '*double meaning*' [sic] (3) of precarity as a concept and a political project: 'the new moment of capitalism that engenders precariousness is seen as not only oppressive but also offering the potential for new subjectivities, new socialities and new kinds of politics' (3). They refer (ibid.) to the challenge of finding solidarity across a hierarchy of occupations and groups with different expectations and capacities under a precarity movement whose end goal is best conceptualized as 'a political rallying point for a diverse range of struggles about labour, migration and citizenship' (20), and which, according to Ross (2008), should be thought of not as '...a common target, but rather as a zone of contestation between competing versions of flexibility in labour markets in which a range of experiences of precarity prevail (42). In this regard, Gill and Pratt (2008) argue for more

attention to cultural workers' own meanings and understandings of how their labour shapes their subjectivities in accepting as well as refusing and resisting work, and to the reasons underlying the relative lack of labour organization within the cultural sector.

5. Relational rural – a contested and negotiated space

These contentions on artists' livelihood expectations and experiences and how these becomes negotiated in rural space are explored here using a relational understanding of rurality. Heley and Jones (2012) outline the emergence of relational studies of the rural, particularly as they seek to provide more critical insights into the complex manifestation of contemporary globalizing trends in the rural pertaining for example to climate change, urban-rural interactions and migration. Building on existing postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, the aim of relational accounts of the rural is to emphasise the 'intertwined and co-constituent production of rural space through material *and* discursive phenomenon, processes and practices' (Heley and Jones, 2012, 209). Associated '*relational rural epistemologies*' (ibid.) seek to express more nuanced understandings of the experiences of rural space and place and to add constructively to critiques on the continued importance of the rural in broad societal terms. A relational perspective involves the notion of space as fluid rather than something fixed, constantly made and remade in hybrid forms through the ways that entities including human and non-human interact (Murdoch, 2006). Woods (2011) describes it as placing 'an emphasis on the significance of networks, connections, flows and mobilities in constituting space and place and the social, economic, cultural and political forms and processes associated with them' (40). Interest is in how the social interactions that occur in space happen by means of processes of negotiation (Massey, 2005). These social interactions are increasingly complex, open to local and global influences, and occurring at different spatial scales and with different temporalities (Massey, 2004b). The significance of negotiation draws attention to issues of contestation and power, and how agency is exercised in the relational production of space (Amin, 2002; Massey, 2004a, 2005). Massey (2004a) refers to the relational construction of identities and associated development of social and political responsibilities, often influenced by global processes that are negotiated and played out at the local level. In a rural context, these can reflect, for example, locally-negotiated positions on global issues such as immigrant labour (De Lima and Wright, 2009), food safety and risk (Enticott, 2001), or natural resource

exploitation (Walker and Fortmann, 2003). Drawing on Massey’s ideas on relational space, Woods’ (2007) concept of the global countryside outlines the value of a relational framework for examining how meanings and perceptions of rurality become contested and negotiated under globalization. He argues that the potential to achieve a deeper comprehension of the ‘politics of negotiation and configuration’ (485) of a globalizing rural, using a relational perspective, can be turned into a heightened capacity for rural actors to exert agency and strategically think through and take advantage of globalization’s opportunities or its alternatives; that the local remains a critical site for the identification and negotiation of rural development priorities, but potentially framed within new and alternative hybrid spatial interpretations of a networked rurality and its ‘constitutive interrelatedness’ across human and non-human domains (Massey, 2005, in Woods, 2007, 503).

6. Methodology

The following discussion draws on a series of indepth interviews conducted with 52 individuals divided across 8 categories (Table 1) in a) west and north-west of Ireland, b) mid and west, Wales, and c) north east of England.

	Artist	Gallery/ craft centre manager	G/CC Manager/ Craft worker	Arts centre manager	Arts co- ordinat or	Arts festival manager	Art studies academic	Artist as academic	Local auth./ state agency arts officers
West/north west Ireland	4	2	2	2		2	1	2	10* (3 Dublin based)
Mid/west Wales	7			3	2		1	1	
North east England	5	1		3	1	1	3	1	1

Table 1 Interview respondents by study location and profession

All of those directly employed in the arts (as arts professionals) were either directly residing in and/or working from rural locations, or, in market towns servicing extensive rural hinterlands. Local authority and state agency arts officers’ remits predominantly extended to the same rural locations as the professional artists (apart from Ireland, with 2 Dublin-based national-level representatives). The choice of study locations was influenced in the main by their rural catchments and by the known presence of artists and other arts-based workers in those areas. In Ireland, individuals were selected initially through their

established arts profiles in the region. Via them, through processes of snowballing, other respondents were identified. In Wales and north east England, academic contacts provided initial names, who then, through snowballing, provided further names. In each of the study areas, cuts to public funding were a strong feature of the arts development landscape, dictating arts activities and development priorities.

The interviews (all face-to face) ranged from one to three hours in length, and took place on various dates between June 2013 and August 2015. The overarching topic for investigation was the significance of the arts to rural sustainability. Sub-topics included; the artist's ability through his or her arts practice to be a direct catalyst for place-based development and capacity-building in a changing rural; the intrinsic value of the arts, through the artist facilitating creative experiences that add to quality of life in the rural; the wider community benefits gained from artists residing in rural localities in terms of generating new social and cultural relations and networks; the challenges and opportunities of the specific rural context experienced by artists that included access to funding, to outlets for their work, to appropriate arts 'infrastructure', and to realizing personal professional development agendas. The interview texts were analysed using discourse analysis. Discourse analysis assumes the existence of multiple socially-constructed realities with language fundamentally shaping those views of reality, with emphasis on the analysis of their meaning, i.e. the way in which society makes sense of them (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). Discourse is thus understood as a form of social practice, with an interactive relationship between discursive practices and the contexts in which they occur, that is also 'constitutive of and constituted by social and political 'realities'' (Barker and Galasinski, 2003, 64). Along with being reflective of dominant social values, Foucault describes discourse as constitutive of key social entities which position people as social subjects (1977). The interview transcripts are first organized (Waite, 2010; Rose, 2011) by identifying key themes that consistently surfaced throughout the interviews. Among these were: the policy, funding and infrastructural challenges of sustaining arts in the rural; the associated institutional constraints on illustrating 'value for money' from artistic endeavours; the challenges of establishing the value of artistic labour in a contemporary rural cultural economy context; livelihood precariousness as an apparently accepted facet of a career in the arts. The second phase of coding for analysis is organized under three main but overlapping thematic

headings: economization of the arts and culture in the rural; discourses of precariousness; precariousness as a potential political rallying point for artists in the rural.

7. Economization of the arts in the rural

Reflecting new cultural economy discourses, a shift in emphasis onto the economic aspects of the arts and how this needed to be managed within the different rural place-based contexts was a central narrative emerging from the interviews in each of the 3 study locations. Arts centre managers and staff were to the forefront in reacting to these trends, especially centres that also functioned as retail outlets for art, that provided other dedicated supports for locally-based artists as well as fulfilling a more public service remit to its audience and customer base. As such they played a key role in shaping the arts landscape in the rural through various struggles and negotiations, functioning as a conduit for a range of internal and external processes and social and material phenomena that emerged to define and situate the arts within specific place-based contexts.

The complexity of the rural context was apparent in the accounts of different strategies devised to try and sustain the arts there, impacted to a large extent by a strong dependence on public funding, the short-term and rigid nature of that funding and other pre-existing structural and capacity-building issues. The majority of centres had charitable status and relied heavily on volunteering. Fundraising to keep centres open had become the overriding concern, with use of local networks and detailed local knowledge to negotiate and establish opportunities such as providing local community information hubs. This collaborative approach to developing new assets, and the associated interactions and activities stimulated new relationships between staff and local communities with the centres' physical space functioning as a kind of activity node for a dense network of local social relations and webs of action that enhanced social and cultural capital that was very specific to each place. At the level of progressing art as something of intrinsic value, the challenge in the rural context was to promote a diversity of art that could reflect contemporary localised, place-based interests (especially to engender a sense of connection to the centres), whilst also offering a broader range, i.e. promoting an enquiring and experimental perspective on art that would enhance their art experience. According to one centre manager in north-west Ireland, this took considerable time and effort because of the

desire and need to be sensitive to local preferences in terms of providing an uplifting arts experience and to see the process emerge as a co-produced one, as this was also usually the main audience and customer base (also reflective of the notion of constantly-changing arts publics).

Facilitating the artist to develop his or her own art talent was also considered a priority. In this regard the centres could be viewed as a contemporary form of social institution for the arts in the rural (Relyea, 2015), providing many of the place-based accessible supports that Jackson (2004) identifies as necessary for artists to pursue a career. Influenced by the global as well as local nature of arts markets they also worked to negotiate and regulate artists' production priorities in this rural environment. This was mainly in terms of promoting artists' entrepreneurial focus to take advantage of sales or exhibition opportunities, locally and externally from establishing how to set a value on their art through to how to brand and market it using digital media and other platforms. Advice on taxation and other accounting matters were also identified as required supports since the majority of artists are self-employed.

This sense of a normative cultural economy perspective and its influence in shaping a hybrid rural space in which certain conflicting priorities about art and artists' professional identities were worked through, was conveyed by a member of an arts centre in the north of England when discussing the ways in which artists needed to become equipped to manage within a competitive global capitalist market and how the centre accordingly targeted its supports:

“People [i.e. artists] will come here, all at different levels; some will be self-employed, some will have an accountant, some will have marketing skills, some use social media; it is the job of our manager to assess them and offer marketing and business advice if it's needed, and try to get everybody up to the same speed so that best practice is in place”.

Best practice in this case meant establishing ways to be constantly attuned to the market, and responding to its needs in reflexive ways. The manager of a centre in north-west Ireland described it in terms of the tension experienced by artists in wanting to focus on the development of their art with that of the need to develop entrepreneurial skills and achieve

commercial success in a rural spatial context in which this was not necessarily established as a norm for the arts:

“The business element is difficult for people [i.e. artists] because your skill is in the actual production of the piece, but when you are producing for the market you have to think about your customer”.

This centre secured EU funding to provide an ambitious programme of training and expert supports for artists in the rural, with a strong emphasis on portfolio development, mentoring, and networking to establish new markets. In rolling out this programme, issues emerged that were specific to the rural place, reflecting the majority of artists’ livelihood status there and the challenges for the centre in fulfilling its funding remit. For example, difficulties in arranging training on a given day, or in having artists commit to a sustained programme of training spread over several weeks was reflective of their complex working arrangements in the rural and the individual struggles to give priority to new kinds of working practices and to create new ‘professional’ spaces that could facilitate their livelihood needs (most artists holding several other jobs possibly over a dispersed geographical area that could not always be planned in advance). In other words, both the centre and the artists had to navigate a complex web of commitments with a range of locally and externally-based rural actors in order for the training to become available. This training would furthermore facilitate artists to become even more adaptable and responsive to the pressures of a globalizing cultural economy without necessarily influencing how that economy operates (Gibson-Graham, 2002). It thus also speaks to Relyea’s (2015) observation of the artist’s increasingly subjective position in producing the art and becoming focused on external relations. However, this is playing out in a rural context in which the kinds of opportunities for artists to realize an income from their art work or art practice are much fewer to start with, and added to by the infrastructural disadvantages that curtail their access to external markets. The benefit for the artist from exhibiting work at the local community hall or a local arts centre for example often becomes less about securing cash sales and more about gaining exposure (Relyea, 2015). The problem with this, according to Relyea (2015) is that exposure can of itself start to become locally justified as an adequate reward to the artist in a professional reputational sense, rather than an expectation that the artist must also sell in order to sustain a livelihood. The reality for the

artist however is that associated rewards (e.g. commissions or other financial supports) do not necessarily follow, and even less so within a rural context where the critical mass of audiences and critics is not normally available to build an arts event with a significant reputational impact for the artist.

8. Rural-based experiences of precariousness

This section examines how artists' livelihoods in the rural reflect a rural-based experience of precariousness, promoted through policy discourses and reinforced by socially-constructed notions of artists as inherently 'precarious' workers, with precariousness portrayed, for example, as a lifestyle choice, blurring certain distinctive livelihood sustainability challenges posed by a rural context. It does this by exploring some of the negotiations and tensions inherent in artists' actual expectations and experiences of being artists in the rural.

MacDonald (2009) discusses the spatiality of precarious employment and the need to understand the relational playing out of economic restructuring and associated policy discourses in terms of how they shape the phenomenon of precarious employment at the individual, place-based level. This is particularly significant in the rural context where processes of rural economic restructuring and deregulation may have rendered more peripheral rural labour markets more vulnerable by successive cuts to key infrastructure and essential supports such as transport, information technology, education and housing (Winson and Leach, 2003). MacDonald (2009) also draws attention to the idea of precarious employment as a socially-constructed phenomenon at the spatial level; for example, in a rural context, seasonal work in natural resource industries with no social security might be considered "'good'" [sic] (9), compared to work in certain other service sectors, or work associated for instance with gendered roles which have traditionally perpetuated experiences of employment vulnerability or exploitation. Frequent references by artists and other respondents in the rural to routinely holding several jobs in order to secure a living whilst continuing to commit whatever resources possible to sustaining their art practice is reflective not just of established global trends of precarious working within the arts profession (Gill and Pratt, 2008, Ross, 2008), but also reinforced by specific rural labour market contexts. The managers of two centres in north west Ireland who were closely involved in promoting local artists' work and in developing their potential, illustrated this in

terms of a series of accepted constraints and challenges of keeping open their respective centres as outlets for local art and crafts whilst also trying to build a profile for the artist:

“They are not solely working for retail; they have a lot of irons in the fire so they are working on various commissions or working towards an exhibition or teaching part-time, so there is a real mix of, you know.... [other revenue-generating activities]”.

“So you know....for them to generate income, they need to have at least three, if not five different sources coming in, because they don’t make it just on selling their craft. They would need to teach if they can....A lot of them would have part time work, a lot of them teach or...you know....that’s how survival is, that’s what it’s about for them”.

Given much of the writing about the value of artists to the so-called emerging experience society with their unique capacities to co-create and to realize collective creativity (Heinonen and Ruotsalainen, 2012) the reference to ‘survival’ reveals something of the myth of the artist as a neo-entrepreneur, i.e. as an agent shaping his or her own destiny and exerting control over the form of his/her labour in a rural context often discursively represented as ripe with such possibilities:

“They make their living solely through their creativity, but they work hard; it’s not a....it’s a way of life, it’s a chosen way of life and people love what they do but it’s not always easy, and particularly in the recession, you know; I know makers who especially in the north of the county really had to think twice about putting petrol in their car to come down here, or the delay in, you know – if money is invested into materials to produce something they don’t necessarily have the cash flow to hold out very long for payments”.

The experience particularly during the recession was of artists in the rural either being forced to let go of their art and dissolve their business in order to take up another occupation there, or of leaving the rural entirely. The majority of artists tend to be self-employed, and there are few if any social supports for the self-employed in Ireland, England or Wales. According to Towse (2006) establishing accurate baseline data on the value of artists’ human capital using criteria such as earnings or levels of education and training is problematic, in large part due to their multiple job-holding. Retaining artists within rural

localities but seeing them have to forgo their art as way of making a living there was articulated as a form of diversification and as an acceptable trade-off:

“They have had to adapt, but the key part is that they are still living within [the locality] and part of the economy; that is the key thing, but they might not necessarily always have a retail product; now at the same time, they may still be working in that industry, so we may from time to time have an exhibition of their work so they are not necessarily no longer part of the [arts scene]... you know, so it’s very much about diversification”.

This shift from arts work to arts-related or non-arts work is described by Menger (2006) as already an inherent aspect of an arts labour market characterized by contingent work on one hand, and an increasing number of artists entering it on the other, without a necessarily corresponding increase in the level of arts activity, but rather with a reduction in the median amount of working time (through shorter hirings) and earnings as a recognized consequence of such trends (Christopherson and Storper, 1989; Menger, 2003). The capacity to tack back and forth between arts and arts-related/non-arts work (and unemployment), and to build a career portfolio that spreads occupational risk is described by Menger (2006) as part of the accepted way of working in the sector. It also necessitates arts and non-arts job opportunities being available and relatively accessible, something that presents a combination of challenges in many rural labour markets. Reputation and professionalism are also highlighted as of key importance in the art market, established through peer opinion and other accepted arts norms. These are predicated on sufficient availability of art-related work, facilitated by access to networks and other kinds of working partnerships and collaborations that generate trust and tacit knowledge about the sector. In the rural context, accessing and sustaining membership of networks was also depicted as an ongoing challenge. For some, even adaptation was not enough to overcome the infrastructural deficiencies of contemporary rural locations. Poor infrastructure meant practical limitations to what could be achieved, and an inability to plan for external markets:

“We haven’t got the broadband infrastructure here.....they [artists] were meeting clients and they had to travel to Dublin or Belfast, so the cost....it all came back to cost again, like material costs. One girl.....she came back, herself and her boyfriend

rented a cottage and she set up her business and she tried so hard at it for two and a half years and then she had to go back to London”.

Menger (2006) also indicates that of the sustained growth in artistic employment in recent decades, much of it has been supported via government subsidies taken up by the non-profit sector which has provided cultural-related services under both arts and non-arts (e.g. urban regeneration) headings, with the other growth area (as outlined earlier) being the wider cultural industries sector. Much of the commentary from interviewees involved in running rural-based arts projects or arts centres was on the problem of funding cuts to this sector. One rural-based artist in the north west of Ireland who ran an initiative in the area to develop arts practice with children and young people involving artists working in partnership with schools, arts organizations, local authorities and government departments, had supported a core group of up to 9 freelance artists over a sustained period:

“We do get core funding from the Arts Council but it just about covers the office; it doesn’t fund any of our projects.... When we have the funding they [the artists] get paid to connect with the school for one day per week but as the funding has unfortunately diminished it’s really half a day; but they [still] need another half day to sort of do their preparations and processing. When I started it would have been quite a strong ethos to give the artists time, paid time to actually plan and develop the work and respond to it as well.....they need to be paid to process what they are doing as well, you know, it’s not enough just to get paid for a half day to go in, you know, but the funders never really understand that”.

During periods of austerity, the arts are among the first to be targeted for cuts by government in particular. The efforts of one of the centres in the north west of Ireland to remain open and in operation could be viewed in rational economic terms as completely unsustainable in terms of the level of unpaid time and effort required to run it; however, the process was described instead in terms of a certain inevitability that this model for running the arts in the rural had to be endured, and a belief that things could be worse:

“We hadn’t paid rent for about two years. We were lucky I suppose holding on to the building and we were looking at the bigger picture [of keeping the centre open]. We weren’t paying wages. So we were in a very very difficult situation”.

Government-sourced project-based funding with its relatively short time lines was also described by one interviewee in the north of England as unrealistic to achieve the kinds of hoped-for impacts that could be measured in conventional economic ways and in a rural context:

“We are never sure where we will be in three months’ time; we can’t plan beyond that. We don’t need an awful lot of money to be honest to run the business, not huge money. I am not getting paid; I am here on a voluntary basis, and we have the running costs down to absolutely the minimum”.

A related point about the poor perception of the arts in economic terms was made by one artist from Wales, when describing efforts by a group of local rural-based artists to make a business case for supported studio space; their efforts failed because studio space was not perceived as business incubator space. Another artist made a similar point on the use of the term ‘creative industries’ and its narrow and selective interpretation:

“They talk about it a lot here in rural Wales because if you say industry, it is linked to business, and if it is linked to business, it can get funding”.

It was also observed that the reduction in funding to the arts was leading to increased competition within rural areas for those same few sources which would most likely dry up completely in due course, and that alternative models to the project-based format to support the arts would have to be found. In the opinion of one institutional representative from the north of England, government did not need to be convinced about the value of the arts to society because the evidence was already available to them, but that it came back to issue of accounting for outputs from public funding sources:

“They [government] have known about this for the last 30 to 40 years; they have tons of evidence; the main problem is that none of it is taken seriously - even if it is evaluated - not if it is not economic”.

One artist, a professional musician based in Wales, described a ‘hand to mouth’ existence – with no savings and little security in a conventional sense. She remarked on a prevailing attitude that artists would ‘make do’ without payment or would work for the love of their art:

“When at a performance there is never any question of the support team [technical, etc.] being paid, but the musician could be last on the list”.

This artist referred to the ‘Night Out’ funding scheme, an Arts Council of Wales initiative that ensured that artists performing at local events got paid, even if only a small number showed up to the event. Another artist from Wales who worked in an advisory capacity to a local municipality on arts-based regeneration similarly commented that strong arguments always had to be advanced to ensure that payment for artists was included as a necessary cost in such plans. In spite of the apparent embrace of cultural labour under neoliberal development agendas, this underlying disconnect between the professional occupation of artist and the value of their resulting labour reflects an enduring association with art and marginal labour (Ross, 2008). At another level of ‘production’, the professional musician described frequently organizing free local events, hiring the village hall for local musicians, particularly young players and her own pupils, giving them the chance to play in front of an audience, and for their families and the local community to have access to a local cultural experience. In effect, she was articulating the ways in which artists residing within local rural communities sustained (without payment) local tradition, enhanced local culture, and added value to those communities’ everyday quality of life.

Markusen and Schrock (2006) argue strongly for the value of what they term the ‘artistic dividend’ (1662), the real economic contribution of artists to a regional economy in terms of productivity and output. This comes not just in the form of sales of their own work, but their other contribution in widening and diversifying the local economic base through the support services they need, materials they purchase, design enhancements they provide for other products or services, and the additional services they provide themselves (through their arts-related or non-economic work). In spite of this evidence, the challenge in making this case for supporting the arts particularly to the main funding agencies remains linked to the forms of impact analysis favoured by a normative cultural economy perspective (Gibson and Kong, 2005).

9. Challenging precariousness – the rural as an emancipatory space?

As outlined previously, an aspect of the rural-based arts context was the difficulty in establishing the status of the arts there, and the impact of artists in definitive terms. On the

question of how they organized themselves as a collective, there was broad agreement among those interviewed that in the rural the sector was characterized by weak social networks and that artists were poorly established as a representative group. One Welsh-based artist, who was involved in setting up a local café and shop that incorporates an art gallery for the work of local artists described the challenge of simply getting beyond compiling a database of those artists and hosting one or two events. The café and shop operate on a volunteering basis. Among the aims are to cultivate the talent of local artists as a rural resource, and to develop community interest in and exposure to local art. For this artist, the problem was that *“nobody is getting paid; there is no money to take it further, there is no individual to develop it”* (SH). Setting up specific networks of and for artists presented further challenges, with a similar experience being recounted by another Welsh-based artist who over time had become aware of the concentration of artists living and working in the area:

“The longer we were here, the more it became obvious that there was a lot happening and being created by people [artists] from Wales, in rural areas because that is where they can buy and live cheaply. Because of it being so rural, I would go to Manchester to find out there was an artist living over the mountain road in Llandyddlys, or I would hear from a friend in San Francisco about a sculpture that was done by two artists from near Aberdyfi”.

Along with three colleagues this artist organized and secured funding for a local-based conference aimed at artists and other organizers interested in promoting outdoor arts, which was seen as a way to connect to artists living and working in the region. This event which was anticipated to interest 40 to 50 people, succeeded in attracting 120 participants. The question then was how to sustain this networking potential beyond a one-off event. For the rest of the time, the interviewee’s contention was that artists were busy securing project funding, accounting for that funding, and travelling to meetings for which there was little likelihood of claiming their expenses. Juggling with other jobs which also took up their time and energy was seen as a form of ‘trade-off’ for continuing with the art that they enjoyed and remaining in the rural. The experience was similar in the Irish context in terms of the challenges of organizing and sustaining artists’ networks in the rural or creating a platform from which their concerns could be articulated in a collective way:

“You kind of learn that they all [artists] have the same problems but nobody is really talking [in a collective way] about what is happening”.

On the potential for academia to play some strategic role via research in altering predominant (institutional and hence public) discourses of the value of the arts via, one northern UK arts officer indicated that research collaborations were increasingly difficult to realize due to the severity of funding cuts to the arts in all but the major urban centres. She made the point that she as a salaried worker had the capacity to give time to research collaborations with universities, but for artists and arts organizations in the rural who were now struggling to stay in operation, time given to research was time lost in sourcing funding or in finding paid work. Coupled with this was the observation that research outputs were often of little transformative (social, political or cultural) value to the specific arts context, and that the arts community had reached a point of researcher fatigue.

Precarity has been articulated as a defining moment of capitalism whereby precariousness engenders both oppression and freedoms (Gill and Pratt, 2008), and potentially presents as a zone of contestation between competing versions of flexibility in labour markets (Ross, 2008). In the case of this research, the prevailing sense is of artists as important actors in a rural development context, but with limited agency to control the conditions under which they secure a livelihood there. The artists in this case embraced rural place from the perspective of the inspirational environment and access to affordable work and living space. While the labour market might have proven flexible in terms of a notional freedom for artists to chart their own career paths with projects that enhanced their professional status as artists, in the rural the available career options were likely to be in something other than the arts. The notion of their accessing an emancipatory space in the rural, a hybrid space that would offer capacity to challenge prevailing perspectives of art as a profession and to adopt a desired livelihood structure which also protected and enhanced that professional status, has been faced with the persistent problem of how a relatively disparate group would construct and maintain such a space on their own terms. Throughout this research, interviews with artists and those in supporting roles in the rural reveal the discursive field of artists' livelihoods informed by powerful narratives of the economic relevance of the arts in the sense of production for exchange (Markusen, 2007). These narratives reflect a normative cultural economy mindset more applicable to the urban context (Bell and Jayne,

2010) which have emanated from central governments and associated public funding agencies, from those arts-centred organizations and agencies whose purpose it is to foster and promote the arts in rural place-based contexts, and from local rural populations whose perceptions of artists may not always extend to an understanding of the livelihood challenges they encounter there. The strong emphasis on marketing and on building a 'professional' profile all indicate an art experience for the artist that is more about his or her subjective position in producing the art than about the art object (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Relyea, 2015). In the rural context, arts centres that function as supporting institutions to artists but that lack the critical mass of population or infrastructure that would provide a local platform for significant arts engagement are operating on predominantly voluntary labour, with few guarantees as to their viability, and in many cases under unsustainable and exploitative circumstances. Oppression and exploitation are reflected not just in the increasingly contingent and precarious nature of artistic work but also in a certain compliance by the artist to continue delivering more with less; in other words, accepting a devaluation of artistic labour and its outputs when there are few other options if work is to be secured, leading to the construction of 'unemancipative' forms of 'cultural coping' (Garnham, 1995, 69). The possibilities to incorporate terms such as *artistic dividend* (Marcusen and Schrock, 2006) or *artistic reputation* (Becker, 2008) into local rural development contexts and discourses as a way to focus relationally on artists' livelihood concerns, and on the notion of the artist as a professional and thus operating from a position of relative privilege (Relyea, 2015) have not been apparent in this research context.

10. Conclusions

This research has set out to explore artists' livelihood experiences in the rural in the context of new cultural economy and new rural development discourses on the potential of art and culture to generate innovative forms of economic growth. A relational perspective on the rural and on artists' livelihoods therein illustrates the more complex experiences of achieving a livelihood that is sustainable in economic, professional and institutional terms and that can also contribute to the sustainability needs of local rural places. Referring back to Woods' (2007) relational concept of the global countryside and the possibilities for openness to new and hybrid arrangements that could bring new development opportunities

negotiated in significant part at the local level, the evidence from this research in the case of artists is of rural places realizing limited benefits from the arts due to a range of artists' livelihood constraints. These constraints are connected to precarious rural labour markets linked to underlying processes of rural restructuring and urban-centric policy approaches emphasizing normative measures of economic success within limited time frames. Ongoing pressure on artists to continuously adapt to the changing demands of the cultural economy but to also continue developing their work within the conventions of art in a reputational sense presents particular challenges in the rural context. Artists as a distinct group in the rural find that in spite of the cultural and social capital they hold in terms of professional training, skills base and potential to contribute to rural sustainability, they struggle to exert agency to transcend policy, institutional and infrastructural limitations and boundaries which have contributed to placing the arts on a sustained precarious footing and to reinforcing popularly accepted discourses of precariousness to define artists' livelihoods. The importance of local communities themselves putting value on artistic labour and outputs, and supporting artists to resist devaluation of their work raises wider questions about the relational ways in which artists' identities become constructed in the rural, and how local communities can themselves exert agency and take up what Massey (2004a) describes as positions of responsibility in acknowledging and negotiating for their contribution, as part of making choices about the sustainability paths that rural places and communities follow. In this research, the notion of precarity as a political project (Gill and Pratt (2008), linked to artists' perceived professional identities and capacities, operating within a flexible labour market that plays to their creative tendencies, and enabling them to emerge as new political subjects to challenge the more exploitative aspects of precarious working has highlighted instead the fragmented and vulnerable nature of the arts in the rural, reflecting the need for more empowering discourses of the arts and forms of arts organization emerging primarily from the local level as part of wider sustainability agendas. This includes greater acknowledgement of the the 'artistic dividend' (Markusen and Schrock, 2006, 1662) which contributes in diverse but less tangible ways to quality of life and sustainability in the rural. Gibson and Klocker (2005) remark on the need to 'unsettle assumptions about how to develop cultural economies' (557) beyond normative cultural economy perspectives and instead to acknowledge its 'multivalency' (ibid). For well over a decade, research has illustrated the *potential* contribution of artists to rural sustainability

and regeneration, through their labour, their arts practice, and through their presence in rural communities acting as local growth drivers. The evidence from this research is that these remain as untapped or taken for granted resources, requiring alternative conceptualizations of the links between art and rural development that emphasize livelihood sustainability as an ethically-desirable outcome of development and a necessary component of enduring rural sustainability.

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