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On the edge of the Milky Way | United Kingdom



culture360.ASEF.org is featuring a series of articles on the topic of #peripheries. The #peripheries have been regarded as being in the geographical margin, distant from the capital cities and cultural centres of countries. With an ongoing decentralisation trend, through this series of articles, we will look at various arts endeavours by artists, cultural professionals and art organisations who operate or occupy the peripheries in an urban society and the role that the arts play. In this article, Bill Aitchison writes about his residency experience at Allenheads Contemporary Arts. Located in the village of Allenheads, a small village in rural Northumbria, Bill writes about how Allenheads is a site of exchange.

Allenheads is a small village in the north of England, high up in the Pennine mountains. It is at the head of a valley, the end of a bus route, there's an occasional Winter ski-slope and one pub that just about stays open. On first appearance it can seem like a peripheral place, far removed from the modern world, yet it defies expectation because it also has its own contemporary art residency: [Allenheads Contemporary Arts \(ACA\)](#).

In 2015/16, I was commissioned to create the performance *Stuck In The Middle With You* that looked at how Allenheads was connected nationally and internationally. Over the next year, I visited the village during different seasons meeting artists, curators and a great many local residents. The self-identity of the village is rural and isolated yet I discovered the reality to be far more diverse. By looking into the history of the area, it became clear that the village had for centuries been a place of mixing and mixing.

had for a long time, been a place of comings and goings.

One day, someone discovered lead under the village.

When it became profitable to extract the lead from the ground, mines were sunk.

Because there were jobs going, miners came from Scotland, Cornwall and Italy.

The Italian miners came to the village because of the jobs and they also came to improve the food.

Because they didn't get enough money to buy Italian food, they would have been better off staying at home.

No, these Italian miners were lucky because they didn't care about the food or the weather, they only cared about money.

- From Stuck in the Middle with You (2016)

While it was easy to see that ACA had been bringing artists from around the world to Allenheads for over twenty years, I wanted to show how there were other forms of mobility that also brought people into the village. I wanted to do this because there can sometimes be a perception that artists lead a charmed life traveling far and wide, while normal people are stuck in one place.



The sound and text performance Stuck in the Middle With You at the ACA gallery (Photo Credit: Alan Smith)

Looking into the village's history, it was easy to see that the mines brought workers from across Europe. In this way it became possible to show that the normal village life was not as disconnected to the outside world as it might appear.

The British princes came to the village to shoot the birds.

The British princes came to the village to shoot birds because their family had been coming for many years and they couldn't see any reason not to keep on coming.

The Dutch prince came to the village because the British princes came.

The British prices came by helicopter.

Because the British princes came by helicopter, the Dutch prince also came by helicopter because he didn't want to be outdone.

- From Stuck in the Middle with You (2016)

ACA was perfectly situated to host and support my performance as it is not located in multi-cultural London, where this sort of thing might be expected, but rather in rural Northern England where it is uncommon.

The audience was a mix of locals and people who drove in from the surrounding region. Some were involved in the arts but many were not. ACA was able to attract this mixed public because Smith and Ratcliffe have been long-term members of the community and consistent in bringing high-quality cultural events to the village.

Because of global warming, bird migratory patterns are changing.

No, global warming is a conspiracy theory: it's freezing and this summer has been rubbish.

No, this summer has been rubbish because of global warming.

Right, because it is warming up it is getting colder.

Because of gentrification, artists migratory patterns are also changing.

Because artist's migratory patterns are changing, they are moving to Brussels, Berlin and even China.

No, because artists are moving to these places, Brussels, Berlin and China are becoming gentrified.

Because the princes and the bankers are descending into the village by helicopter to shoot the birds, there is global warming.

No, because artists are flying in from Brussels, Berlin and China, there is global warming.

- From Stuck in the Middle with You (2016)

The performance began with a tour of the village that set the scene and made it easier for people to see the links between the local and the global. This was followed by a sound and text performance in the gallery shop, a pint in the pub and ended with a ten-dish Chinese meal made by my family in law.



A tour of the village introducing the themes of national and international connectivity.

(Photo Credit: Zhu Miyi)

What this project made clear to me is that not only is the idea of there being cosmopolitan centres and parochial margins an exaggeration today, it was often untrue in the past too. Globalisation happens from below too and even if we tell ourselves stories about the purity of

ideas, blood or nature, the reality is far more complicated. Within the arts, similar narratives of purity and tradition are sometimes popular too, but culture thrives on travel and exchange.

Postscript


I returned to Allenheads in 2019 for a brief visit and looked at what had changed. ACA has embarked upon an art-science collaboration with astronomers and now hosts an observatory. Looking at images of the Milky Way, I could see the bright lights of the galaxy lighting up a belt in the night sky. This made me wonder if we, on planet earth, are in the perfect location to observe it, located as we are on one of its outer arms. If so, then this is something that the earth and Allenheads have in common: in the clear dark skies on the edge of things, we sometimes see more clearly than we do in the bright lights of the city-centre.

This article is written by [Bill Aitchison](#), a British performance artist based in China. He has presented his work in galleries, theatres and festivals in Europe, Asia, America, Australia and The Middle East. He holds a practice-based PhD from Goldsmiths College, London is curator of Last Minute Live Art and teaches at Nanjing University.

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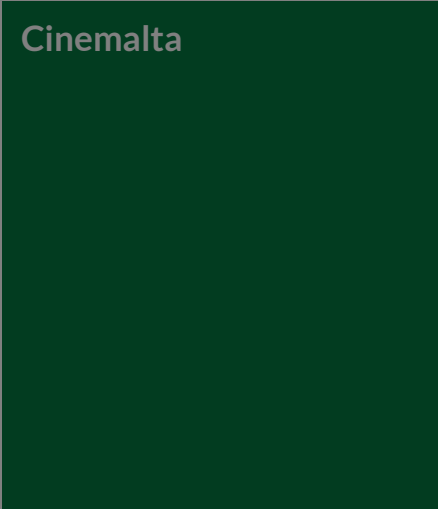
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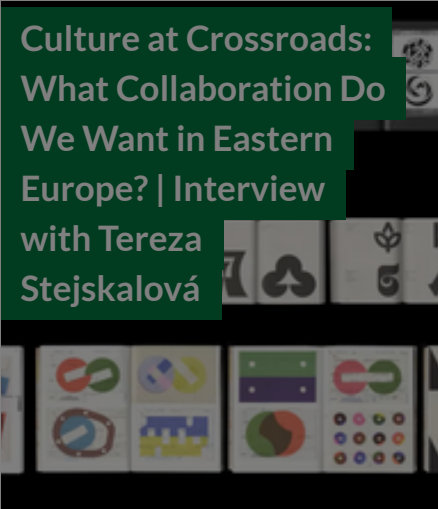
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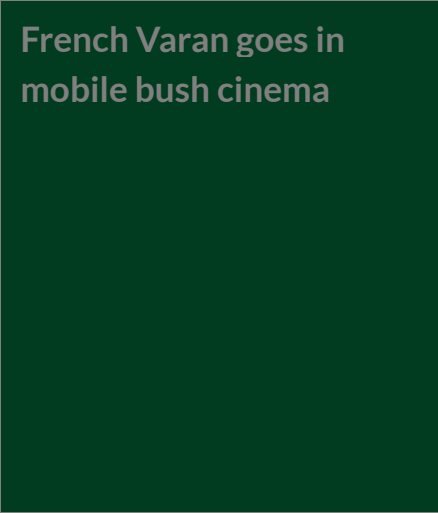
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