

TAKING STOCK OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN RURAL FRANCE

BY MARIE PLEINTEL

It might seem strange to associate contemporary art with rurality in an era when contemporary creativity, like modernity and the avant-garde before it, is firmly rooted in an urban context and the institutions that matter – schools, galleries and exhibition spaces – are mainly concentrated in capital cities and large metropolises. Does contemporary art necessarily belong to the urban environment or does it not have a place nowadays under the apple trees along with jazz, literature and the performing arts?

REDEFINING RURAL

Our stereotype of the countryside and its inhabitants has lost touch with the radical and complex developments of the past few decades. Demographic tendencies have been reversed: there is a new attraction for the countryside, its productive function giving way to leisure and residential homes. Ways of life have harmonised and today's country dwellers are no longer yesterday's peasants. The arrival of urbans, living in the country but working in the town, and of neo-rurals, who have left the city to adopt new lifestyles, has deeply modified the profile of the typical country dweller.¹

The borders between urban and rural have become porous to such an extent that geographers and sociologists have abandoned these dichotomous concepts as unusable. The French countryside is now multifaceted and its relationship with urban areas is complex; it is composed of urban countrysides with strong interdependent relationships with nearby urban areas; of new countrysides with dynamic demographics and economies due to sizeable tourism and residential functions; of fragile countrysides where agricultural and industrial activity is in decline; and of transition countrysides.²

CONTEMPORARY ART AND RURALITY: AN OXYMORON?

The countryside, however, can no longer be considered as a cultural desert. The digital revolution has homogenised individual approaches. From the supply side, territorial development has allowed certain sectors to benefit from efficient distribution networks; such is the case for the performing arts and especially for books where departmental libraries have nurtured the development of municipal libraries even in some of the smaller communities. Where does this leave the visual arts and, in particular, contemporary art? The process of territorial development seems to have ground to a halt at the gates of the countryside. Furthermore, local authorities and councilors seem to be largely unaware of contemporary art and are loathe to make it central to their cultural policies. Such a commitment would be considered as “dangerous” and “difficult” given their “lack of expertise”.³

It is, however, deceptive to speak about the rural population as a distinct unit, for it harbours the same desires and expectations as the populations of large towns, with the exception, of course, of Paris.⁴ Rural folk are no less connoisseurs than city folk; it is quite simply that, due to a statistical illusion caused by the low population density and

1 Bertrand Hervieu & Jean Viard, *Au bonheur des campagnes (et des provinces)* (to the joy of the countryside and provinces), L'Aube, Paris, 2005.

2 Délégation interministérielle à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Attractivité Régionale (DATAR, The Interministerial Delegation for Territorial Development and Regional Attractivity), *Quelle France rurale pour 2020? Contribution à une nouvelle politique de développement rural durable* (What kind of rural France for 2020? A contribution towards a new policy for sustainable rural development), CIADT, 3 September 2003.

3 Jean Lafond-Grellety & Laurent Mazurier, *Les politiques culturelles en milieu rural, Méthodologies et bonnes pratiques* (cultural policies in rural areas: methodologies and good practices), Territorial éditions (Dossier d'experts), Voiron, 2007.

4 Olivier Donnat, *Les pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère du numérique. Enquête de 2008* (the cultural practices of the French in the digital era. Survey from 2008), La Documentation

the geographic dispersal of the inhabitants, the small core of professionals and aficionados who are highly visible in the large centralised urban structures are less easy to find in the rural environment. All the more necessary, therefore, to put awareness campaigns for contemporary art at the core of the policies of rural arts organisations.

With respect to contemporary art, therefore, rural areas differ from urban areas not because of their audiences, but because of the paucity of art on offer.

A WIDE-REACHING NETWORK, SCATTERED INITIATIVES

Initiatives do, nevertheless, exist. This was shown by research carried out for a thesis about established structures in communities of less than 3,000 inhabitants.⁵ More than 100 organisations were found at the national level; these exhibition spaces, residencies, contemporary art events and programmes constitute the structural basis of a network, augmented by more irregular happenings and appearances such as artists' workshops or projects, and Nouveaux commanditaires (New Patrons) projects.⁶ These initiatives vary in size and legal status: internationally renowned art centres such as the Centre International d'Art et du Paysage, at Vassivière in the Limousin, sit alongside volunteer associations with no permanent exhibition space that use public spaces to exhibit, such as cent lieux d'art² at Solre-le-Château in the north of France which has taken over an old shop window made available by a local inhabitant.

In addition to these associative structures, there are also organisations managed at municipal or departmental levels such as the Musée-Atelier du Verre, at Sars-Poteries, run by the Conseil Général of the Nord department, or the Établissements Publics de Coopération Culturelle (EPCC, Public establishments for cultural cooperation) such as the Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, a centre for art and nature in the Centre region. Residencies, such as the Ateliers d'Arques in the Midi-Pyrénées, are found throughout France; roughly a quarter of the 196 residency programmes inventoried by the CNAP⁷ were in rural areas. Circuits featuring artworks, be they in natural surroundings, such as the Sentier des Lauzes (the stone roof-tile circuit) in Rhône-Alpes, or in heritage sites, such as L'Art dans les Chapelles (chapel art) in Brittany, have seen their numbers increase considerably over the past few years.

The regions with the most active rural spaces are Brittany, Midi-Pyrénées, the Limousin, Burgundy, Aquitaine, Poitou-Charentes, Rhône-Alpes and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. The majority of these regions manage to combine the favourable dynamics of their rural areas with a strong contemporary art presence. The rural areas of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, classified as fragile countrysides, working class and traditional rural spaces, where the industrial fabric is in decline⁸, have few structures dedicated to contemporary art. It is obvious that not only the issues, but also the socio-economic situation and the needs of the inhabitants, are radically different from those of more demographically and economically attractive and dynamic regions such as Brittany. The Limousin, although also categorised as fragile, has a history of experimentation. Its position reflects the strong and continuous political commitment over several decades to transform its 'peasant' image, and the enthusiastic, dedicated undertaking by those involved with contemporary art. This meeting of political and artistic players is vital for the emergence of viable and meaningful projects.

LIMITED GOVERNMENTAL INFLUENCE

The impact of governmental policies appears limited, if one only takes into consideration those pro-active policies that have resulted in the creation of key establishments, methods of diffusion and strategic protocols. Within the context of rural development, seven contemporary art centres (CAC) have been set up in rural areas, most of them sited along the "diagonale des faibles densités"⁹ from the Abbaye Saint-André CAC in Meymac (Limousin, 1979) to the Synagogue of Delme (Lorraine, 1993). Nevertheless, they sometimes find it difficult to adjust to the rural context into which they have

⁵ Marie Pleintel, *Art contemporain en milieu rural: un état des lieux* (Taking Stock of Contemporary Art in Rural Areas). Thesis presented for an EDHEC degree, Msc Management culturel et solidaire (MSc in Cultural and Solidarity Management) under the supervision of Isabelle Sequeira, December 2011. Available at: <http://www.pleintel.fr/memoire-art-contemporain-en-milieu-rural/>

⁶ The 'New Patrons' projects, initiated by the Fondation de France, allow citizens faced with issues relating to society or the development of a rural area to commission a contemporary artist to help answer their concerns. Where these projects differ from other such initiatives is in being based around a relationship involving three main players: the artist, the citizen(s) responsible for commissioning, and a cultural mediator approved by the Fondation de France. This trio of actors is augmented by public and private partners brought together to sponsor the project. www.nouveauxcommanditaires.eu.

⁷ Centre National des Arts Plastiques (National Centre for the Visual Arts), 196 Résidences en France, Guides de l'art contemporain, Paris, 2010.

⁸ DATAR, *ibid.*

⁹ The diagonal of low densities⁹: a diagonal line crossing France from the north-east to the south-west that goes through areas of low population density.

been inserted, more often as a result of the combined political volition of the ministry and the local authorities, than of reinforcing pre-existing local circumstances. The support given by some CACs to creation, diffusion and promotion is sometimes considered to be totally disconnected from their local context.

It was envisaged that the Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain (FRAC, Regional Contemporary Art Funds) would constitute the second element of this policy of network creation and decentralisation. These support and diffusion structures hinge on regional collections of contemporary art that they are supposed to augment and disseminate to a wide audience through educational activities, temporary exhibitions off-site, loans and a strong presence in schools. In reality, however, the FRACs tend to have become settled and therefore lack the impetus to get out into the countryside. The reality of these off-site activities, such as a lack of appropriate exhibition spaces, restrictive lending conditions, and limited human and financial means, contributes to the scarcity of projects. The official circular of 28 February 2002 further emphasised that priority should be given to partnerships with other regional cultural institutions, thus reinforcing the geographical imbalance. The most engaged FRACs in rural areas do work towards fitting out exhibition spaces in schools and agricultural colleges (FRAC Picardy) or developing partnerships with heritage sites (partnership between the Abattoirs FRAC Midi-Pyrénées and the Château de Taurines). The FRAC Poitou-Charentes, with its site at Linazay in the department of Vienne, is the only one with a solid base in a rural area.

Furthermore, the urban CACs that do decide to position themselves as key structures with respect to the surrounding areas or that initiate activities out of town are the exception rather than the rule. They are not encouraged: their public service charter mentions a "responsabilité territoriale" (territorial responsibility), which is a lot less precise and restrictive than the "mission de diffusion de proximité" (mission of diffusion throughout the community) imposed on performing arts organisations. Putting this territorial responsibility into practice depends therefore on the inclinations of the individual organisations. The educational establishments under the wing of the Ministry of Agriculture¹⁰ represent a major asset with respect to cultural decentralisation and democratisation in rural areas since they place artistic activities and education at the heart of their programmes. Since 1965, following various agreements and official circulars, socio-cultural education has been integrated as an indissociable and indispensable element of agricultural training. Some agricultural colleges have become important local hubs such as Rurart in Poitou-Charentes which is not only a regional network for cultural activities in agricultural education, but also a multimedia and art centre.

Since the memorandum of understanding of 24 July 1984, both the Ministry of Culture and Communication, and the Ministry of Agriculture have been engaged in deliberating the cultural development of the rural landscape. This led to the signature on 23 September 2011 of the framework convention 'Alimentation, Agri-Culture' (food, agri-culture). Even though books and the cinema remained priorities in terms of inter-ministerial intervention, the performing and visual arts were both specifically mentioned. The convention acknowledged the progress made in both these domains over the past few years. It also stated the necessity to pursue these efforts towards a more balanced coverage of France and an improved networking of those involved in order to enable new synergy and configurations (particularly with regard to mobile and digital devices) to emerge. The ministries were hoping to encourage two main driving forces: on the one hand, the presence and strong commitment of artists within local populations and, on the other hand, the support for, and development of, non-professional cultural activities.

SPECIFIC AND COMPLEX ISSUES

The countryside provides an unusual forum for contemporary art initiatives. These projects find themselves enmeshed in a web of complex issues combining the pursuit of support for creativity and diffusion, the need to heighten public awareness of contemporary art, and political issues linked to the development of rural areas. They are also at the intersection of the "rural dimension of cultural development" and the "cultural dimension of rural development".¹¹ Project directors have to resist being instrumentalised by the politics of economic and territorial development, and by pressures aimed at reducing their role to entertainment. With politicians, they experience relationships of mutual dependence that can either generate tensions that may bring their projects to a grinding halt, or lead to opportunities for joint actions and the exchange of expertise. These relationships have become more delicate as the political landscape has become more complex with the creation of national and regional parks and other areas of special interest, and the

¹⁰ Until June 2012, its full title was the Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation, de la Pêche, de la Ruralité et de l'Aménagement du Territoire (Ministry of Agriculture, Food, Fisheries, Rurality and Territorial Development).

¹¹ Pierre Moulinier, 'Action culturelle en milieu rural' (cultural action in rural areas), L'Observatoire des Politiques Culturelles, Special Report, n°6, spring 1993.

'communautés de communes' (federations of usually small and usually rural municipalities); these have brought with them several extra layers of participants whose cultural skills and responsibilities often overlap. This expansion of the numbers of interested parties is, however, financially necessary since communities under 3,000 inhabitants, on their own, do not have a lot of financial clout. They have to be supported by various institutions including the Conseils Généraux (departmental level), the Conseils Régionaux (regional level) and the Directions Régionales des Affaires Culturelles (national/regional level), in each case, through dedicated budgets.

LITTLE-KNOWN TERRAIN FOR EXPERIMENTATION AND INNOVATION

The distinctiveness of these rural zones leads some project promoters to break with the pre-defined urban models and come up with new frameworks and relationships with the public. In the same way as the Nouveaux Territoires de l'Art¹², some projects use artistic experimentation to pose questions about social, economic and political issues. They too have developed an approach similar to that of the social and solidarity economy by transposing the principles of gifting and reciprocity to the art world through exchange and non-monetary participation (voluntary work, contribution, sharing of knowledge and skills...) in return for the social value of their activities (creating social links, human development, enhancing the value of local heritage and know-how, the energy boost provided by the artist's vision...). This vision is accompanied by values such as proximity and conviviality.

The initiators of these projects are not trying to justify the presence of contemporary art in a priori isolated contexts as much as to reveal its pertinence. They believe in the capacity of art to act as a lever (for development, for becoming socially-aware ...). Their activities go beyond merely shifting artworks and artists into a rural setting and attracting an audience of professionals and amateurs away from their urban towers. These initiatives measure the limits of actions that consist of simply presenting without posing conditions or making allowances for a non-initiated audience. They sometimes, therefore, take short cuts, making contemporary art accessible through simply doing it, through interdisciplinary programming or through the involvement of the inhabitants in the creative process. This means rethinking the modalities of the public's relationship with the work and transforming observers, simple beneficiaries of finished cultural products, into active participants, usually with the artist and the actual performance as go-betweens. It is significant to note that these projects talk more about 'inhabitants' than 'the public'. This lexical slide shows the willingness to go beyond the passive institution-visitor relationship and to transfer the utopian attempt to speak to a wider public to the totality of the inhabitants.

At the regional level, the Chambre d'eau in Le Favril in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region works on this permeability between creativity and inhabitants, to the extent of having invited the latter to celebrate the centre's tenth anniversary by inviting an artist of their choice (one whom they had previously come across at the centre) into their homes to 'perform' a short concert, a presentation of his/her work or a workshop. The Chambre d'eau also works towards the recognition of rural spaces as spaces for experimentation, supporting the creation of a network of all those involved across the territory.¹³

The Vent des Forêts, an open-air contemporary art space in the Meuse department, has created a genuine alchemy between the artists and the local volunteers, partner firms and craftsmen who are involved in welcoming the artists and producing their work, and housing them during their residencies. Not only is art perceived here as a lever for the development of the countryside, but the countryside itself is perceived as a space for innovation where it is possible to experiment with new configurations, far removed from the white cube model of most galleries, and where the artist is confronted with different realities and production methods.

The purpose of the projects that adopt this approach is not so much to increase the attendance as to encourage support for, and identification with, the projects. Ironically, this is sometimes helped by the paucity of artistic presence in rural areas which creates a scarcity value which, in turn, makes it all the more special for the inhabitants.

As in all cultural wastelands, these artistic initiatives in rural areas give rise to new encounters and pose new questions

¹² Fabrice Lextraît, *Friches, laboratoires, fabriques, squats, projets pluridisciplinaires... une nouvelle époque de l'action culturelle* (wastelands, laboratories, factories, squats, multidisciplinary projects: a new era of cultural action; a report for Michel Duffour, State Secretary for Heritage and Cultural Devolution), La Documentation française, Paris, 2001.

¹³ Notably by organising get-togethers for professionals, the latest of which was entitled 'La ruralité, un espace d'innovation artistique et d'expérimentation culturelle en Europe' (rurality, a space for artistic innovation and cultural experimentation in Europe) in partnership with OPALÉ, 28 and 29 February 2012 at Le Favril.

about the presence of contemporary art in the countryside, about its relationship with the population and about its inclusion in a more global debate about the economy, tourism and rurality. It is a rich and unique terrain for experimentation in terms of artistic creation, of the evolution of the public and of closing the gap between artists and society.