

Ryan Gander's Night School 6
6th April 2011, ICA, London.

Surrendering the OUTPOST

An idea of a centre and periphery underwrites the name of the contemporary art gallery 'OUTPOST'. Geographically, it is an outpost located in the county of Norfolk, a county without motorways, close to the coast. It is at the edge, sure, but is also peripheral in relation to the metropolitan capital London. OUTPOST is a useful name because it enfolds these two central qualities of its identity as an organisation: separateness from the metropolitan art world and isolation in a predominantly rural county.

Norwich has effective transport links, communications, clean tap water... A linear contraposition between centre and periphery is a powerful idea that historically has shaped England's social and economic identity; a legacy we are still very much with: A centre that irradiates light and a periphery shadowed by backwardness; a plentiful centre and a lacking periphery; a dominant centre and a submissive periphery. Entangled amongst this are the powerful and enduring ideas of the periphery as 'authentic' (local, free from the pollutions of the global market) and the centre as global (not authentic, fake). If anybody has a neat encapsulation of 'authenticity' I would be interested to hear it. It is not possible, or indeed useful, to reduce the exchanges between centre and periphery in a linear fashion.

Yesterday I asked OUTPOST founder-member Kaavous Clayton if for him disinterest in London was part of the initial design of the gallery: 'Yes,' he replied, 'at first it was an aggressive stance. I didn't want to get bogged down by the relationship between the gallery and London. As I saw it London drained the activity away from Norwich once students left the art school. It felt like domination. OUTPOST gave it a focus and a community. I was keen to ignore London.' There were important examples and precedents elsewhere. Transmission Gallery in Glasgow, for example, provided an organisational model. If regional work were to be relevant and engaged in current critical debates it had to be seen amidst a bigger context; for Kaavous this too could be provided by peripheral examples. I asked whether the anti-London position was an ideology shared across all of the committee. 'No,' he answered, 'we realised it was possibly not a good approach, a realistic approach, to ignore London. It didn't last very long'. OUTPOST was born out of a relationship of difference to London, through frustration and aggressive distancing.

Some years before in Norwich Phil Gardner ran a contemporary art space called 'Frontier' in his flat. Frontier, OUTPOST – for some reason the artist's identity in Norwich seems couched in the language of attack, geo-political boundary, terms of

colonial occupation. Put like that it makes OUTPOST sound like a settlement of metropolitan advanced art within the regions, an envoi from the Capital. Yet an important characteristic of the settlement community is that despite maintaining ties to its homeland, it is not actually under the home state's system of government. Does it represent the centre? Become native? Get attacked by locals? Literature and film of Western modernity is populated by eccentrics, egoists and demigods permitted to thrive in these geographical margins. Forgive me for emptying the following examples of their political meaning... Think of Mr. Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Belgian ivory trader who uses his influence over African natives to prosper; or Fitzcarraldo, the visionary who drags a paddleboat over a mountain in Werner Herzog's film of the same title. In the humanities liminal spaces have been celebrated for their state of potentiality, bell hooks, with a clear political agenda, valorises peripheries as places for hybrid forms to develop away from the centre. These are only a few examples they suggest that all kinds of fascinating hybridizations and maverick things happen at the peripheries. How and why might this relate to galleries operating in peripheries? Distance from London might afford the opportunity to develop independent ideas, to move beyond boundaries? Perhaps intense working groups form more easily in small regional towns and cities in ways that are harder in the capital?

I recall reading a short sentence by the critic and chair of the New Contemporaries Sasha Craddock. 'If you want to be an artist essentially,' it went something like, 'you must move to London.' Probably it stayed with me because this essentialist statement came from a very visible agent of taste in the contemporary art world. I was a little taken back by its centralist attitude. Rather than paraphrase it, remember it through my own wants and mores, and because by serendipity Craddock might be here tonight, I ran through search engines in order to be precise. *Athens, e-flux, Frieze, Art Monthly*... then I found it in my inbox, in an email from Standpoint Gallery in Hoxton via OUTPOST. It read: 'Artists from say, Liverpool, Newcastle or the countryside, can be more cut off than artists from Europe; and years of de-centralization has tended to hide the essential value of London to regional artists.'

This is a specious comment. It must be said that Liverpool and 'the countryside' – I'm guessing the British countryside (where thousands of Londoners go at the weekend to get away from the city - it could be anywhere as long as it is not London) – are part of Europe. Otherwise I do not dispute that London might be of importance to regional artists. Though to fix the echo of the imperialist logic of dominance and dependence I insist on swapping 'London' with 'regional arts' and 'de-centralisation' with 'centralisation', maybe editing it a little too. To rephrase: 'centralisation has tended to hide the essential value of regional arts to London.' The question is are these regional arts compatible with London?

Jonathan P Watts, east Norfolk / London, April 2011