

# A Vision From the Verge

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I have been a member of the vibrant and dynamic Rural Arts Group (RAG) for the last 10 years. Since our foundation we have really focused on developing a collective vision and sense of purpose. While people often point out the disadvantages of living in such a peripheral location, we see it an opportunity to develop our creative careers in a stunningly beautiful and inspiring context. From here on the West Coast of Ireland it is an eight-hour round trip to Dublin and the next stop west is New York.

Much to the surprise of visitors, we have a great rural arts infrastructure with custom built, professional exhibition spaces. We used to rely heavily on pop-up spaces but we got tired of DIY, cleaning, invigilating and incurring debt. We now have a clear transparent process for accessing the local arts infrastructure. RAG operates as a collective and has a rotating membership made up of artists, curators and representatives from each of the local arts organisations. Together we contribute to the arts programming in the county, ensuring that the resources and spaces provide opportunities for local, national and international artists. The arts programme reflects our concerns and interests, and vigorously supports the role of contemporary art in the wider world. This shared programming has led to far greater engagement with the arts locally. We also strengthen and build the capacity of local artists by providing feedback on proposals and opportunities for professional development. Everyone's contribution is equally valued and we are all financially remunerated for our contributions.

We are proud of our dynamic residency and visiting artists programme, which bring vitality and energy to the community. We invite a number of artists but also are committed to an open submission process. We find that international artists are attracted here by the remoteness of the region, the opportunity to experience real rural Ireland and the potential for collaboration. We regularly invite selected curators and arts managers from outside the area for a day of organised studio tours, local organic food and cultural experiences. The feedback has been extremely positive and this initiative has led to a number of creative projects such as the Feminist Farmers' Luncheon and the Digging the Dirt exhibition series

We have worked closely with local agencies to develop a good broadband infrastructure. This has been a great relief as we used to have to travel to our nearest town to upload large files. We find that this has greatly enhanced the possibilities for home working and setting up new creative businesses. We have a number of individual and shared studios in the area but we find that our more flexible co-working venues, 'Imaginate' and 'Share' are really popular. Artists can rent an

open studio or desk space by the day or the month, which greatly expands the sense of creative community and reduces the risk of isolation. The co-working venues are multifunctional and cross-disciplinary. They act as performance spaces where artists, musicians and other practitioners can experiment and share works in progress as well as completed projects.

The childcare services in these spaces are critical, supporting parents to develop their practice without disruption. This service has also attracted a number of younger creative people to relocate to the area, which has had a positive knock-on effect.

We are fortunate to have the only official publicly funded retirement accommodation for artists in the country. The eco friendly passive homes at La Retraite overlook the sea and have direct access to the beach. Each artist has her/his own private living quarters and studio. The intergenerational programme at the centre provides invaluable opportunities for younger artists to learn from those with more experience. The art therapy and creative activities also provide opportunities for employment for local artists.

Linking in with the local community has really helped us to develop a sustainable creative network. We have a number of socially engaged creative projects with asylum seekers, Travellers, people with disabilities and other youth and community groups. Artists who enjoy working with children are active in developing the creative capacity of the next generation through workshops and artistic programmes.

Working with local businesses and social entrepreneurs has led to a patronage scheme that financially supports artists at all stages of their career. We have a purchase scheme where local businesses, hotels, cafes and pubs are supported in buying original artworks directly from artists. We've also witnessed the development of murals and public art projects, which have further enhanced the area and received positive reviews from tourists.

All in all we are delighted with the progress over the last 10 years. We have learned the valuable lesson of creating a collective vision with clear and achievable goals in order to achieve real change for artists in our area.

*NOTE: Lisa Fingleton is an artist, filmmaker, writer and facilitator based on a small farm on the Wild Atlantic Way. When she was invited to write this column she very briefly considered subjecting the reader to a factual account of the sometimes-bleak experience of rural artists. Having rejected this option, she decided to imagine a currently fictional but ultimately desirable vision for rural artists 10 years from now.*

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