

'It pushes every boundary that you have'

- an interview with Lone Leth Larsen and Marilyn Reddan



Lone Larsen, left, and Marilyn Reddan, center, at their panel in Hildesheim

Marilyn Reddan is a programmer and curator from Ireland, where she works on cultural development for Galway European Capital of Culture 2020. Lone Larsen is Danish and, among others, the international cultural adviser for Aarhus Capital of Culture 2017. Both were recently invited to the [European Conference in Hildesheim](#) to speak about Capitals of Culture as potential tools for empowering rural areas. We interviewed them at the end of a day of presentations and study visits, followed by a long wait in a bus due to a road accident, a late dinner and a pumpkin-soup-making activity in Kulturfabrik cultural centre in Hildesheim. They heroically agreed to talk with us and even follow-up by email, though some of them did complain that our questions called

more for 'a whole dissertation' than a short answer. Point taken, Lone Larsen. May they both be thanked for their unflagging energy.

Okay, let's try to make it short and have just two questions. First, why is it important to focus on culture in rural areas?

Lone Larsen: I think that working in rural areas gives artists a sort of freedom. I don't know, it may not apply for Germany, but for Denmark you get a sort of freedom and part of that is an economical freedom for yourself, because it is cheaper to live. That means that you can do more things with what you have. But working with the people there also gives the artists new views. Because the people living in villages have their own agenda and their own dreams, and they are not necessarily easy to work with. They challenge the artists to think

differently. For instance, that project with Joseph Beuys [curated in the context of Aarhus 2017 and discussed in Lone Larsen's morning conference panel – Ed.] in Åsted, in Northern Denmark, the people were really concerned about having more trees. They wanted to have a small wood, a little forest! And the artists really had to think, because they had come up with a totally different idea, but they couldn't impose that on the people. Then they thought of the project by Beuys, 'A Stone for a Tree' [In the 1980's, artist Joseph Beuys organized the planting of 7000 trees, each paired with a basalt stone column, throughout the greater city of Kassel, for a piece called 7000 Oaks. – Ed.]. And suddenly it became very interesting, because the villagers got their trees, and they also got a piece of art. And in that whole process they got ownership. I think this was very stimulating for the artists. To see the kind of development that they initiated.

Marilyn Reddan: As an artist or an art manager,

when you choose to work in a rural area, it pushes every boundary that you have. You really have to be highly creative. You have to be an engineer, you have to be a funder, you have to work twice as hard to develop the audience. You know that if you walk down in the middle of Galway city there is a ready-made audience, you can give a performance and there will be people there, but you can't do that in Tuam or Oughterard or Ballinasloe. There, you have to create the audience. So working in a rural area is so much more challenging, and in my experience – I've programmed and directed projects in both cities and rural areas – it is so much more rewarding.

My feeling is also that some people still have the idea that they can bring culture to rural areas, that they imagine as sort of cultural deserts, but in fact those areas already have their own very sophisticated culture. Recently I was watching a documentary about agriculture in France [Le Temps des Grâces by Dominique Marchais - Ed.] and one interviewee said

Planting trees in Åsted. Photo credit: Kurt Sørensen



that the only chance for rural areas is if city people completely rethink their relationship to rural areas and realize how much they are users of them and dependent on them.

Marilyn Reddan: I think that when you go to rural areas... The people I've met there are sometimes the most developed audiences, because they have to travel to attend theatre, to attend music, they have to travel to attend cinema and they do it because they want to, because they really believe in it. As opposed to people who live in the city, and it's on their doorstep and they can go or don't go, and there is no real appreciation. But if you really have to get in your car for forty minutes or fifty minutes to go to the theatre, you really appreciate it, you want to be there and you have a knowledge.

Most of the artists, filmmakers, writers and musicians that I work with live in rural areas and commute into the city. They are inspired by the landscape. It gives them their energy, they draw their energy from it and they want to create work that is of that place. They might work in the city, but the work is of that place.

Lone Larsen: Yes, I think that you are touching on something different and that is that the demography of villages is changing rapidly. They aren't just rural communities any longer. Anyway in Denmark they very often aren't. Sometimes they're half-and-half. People from all over the place are now going to live in villages because of a number of reasons.

But there is another point in what you said, that has to do with expecting people to attend culture. I think that we saw a very good example of how things shouldn't be this afternoon, in my view anyway. I think it is very important to have elite art, I just think that you shouldn't compare apples with pears.

And this afternoon we had a discussion about high culture, the arts and then social culture. And I really was very frustrated about the way people were talking about culture in villages. Because people in villages have a culture. They may want to have and to appreciate urban culture, and travel far for it, but they have their own culture and if we don't respect that I think we will have a big problem. But this divide between high culture and low culture has been there for centuries...

Are you speaking about one of the study visits?

Lone Larsen: Yes.

I was actually at a different study visit from you.

Lone Larsen: Okay. Well, we were in a very nice and interesting arts residency place [*Hermannshof Völksen – Ed*]. It was extremely interesting from this point of view, but also in the light of our panel discussion this morning. I just did not see how they worked with participatory culture. I may be wrong, because we may not have been given the whole story, but in my view it was patronizing towards people living in villages and it did not seem to be meeting village people where they were. It wasn't respecting their culture. I think that cultural managers have to appreciate and know this and respect this aspect of people. That is one thing. And then I come back to what we were discussing this morning and that is that there is a principle of culture attendance, which is that we can bring art into the villages and hope that people will come to look at it. Or we can make something where they participate. Those are two different things. The study visit we had this afternoon in the residency... I felt that the culture they brought to the village was to their taste, not to the village's taste.

Marilyn Reddan: I think, as well, village life is a way of life. Even though I work in Galway city I live in a village. It's twenty minutes outside of the city, and I made a very specific decision to raise my children there, because I wanted them to grow up in a community where they knew everyone and where they were safe, where they had landscape, where they had language. My children speak Irish only. They don't speak English in school, they go to a Gaelscoil and so they are immersed in Irish culture, in village culture. And for me they have the best of both worlds. We live in a small village, it's a tiny community, they know everyone, they speak a local language, a local dialect, but they have a life in the city as well. I try to encourage both because I want them to appreciate both. And to hear my seven-year-old, when we turn the car in at our house, say 'Oh, Mum, look at that view', is so special. She is seven years and she appreciates being able to see the sea.

Coming back to our members' point of view, how can cultural centres participate in this work on rural areas and regions? In particular, how can they collaborate with European Capitals of Culture towards the type of cultural decentralization you both argue for?

Lone Larsen: Cultural centres are in the middle of people. They can contribute to the development by being the frame for village development and participative processes. Cooperation with ECoCs should be quite natural if there is an ECoC in the neighbourhood. It's up to them to prove that they have interesting projects, innovative approaches and new kinds of participative projects.

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<http://www.aarhus2017.dk/en/>

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