

# **Konstgödning: Co-producing Art in the Outskirts of the World**

*Evangelia Petridou and Dimitri Ioannides*

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Faculty of Human Sciences

Mid Sweden University, 831 25 Östersund

Phone: +46 (0)10 142 80 00



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## Introduction

Regardless of whether we are talking about remote Aegean islands, isolated mountainous regions in the Carpathians or the periphery of northern Sweden, many communities have to negotiate solutions to chronic problems in order to survive. To be sure, there are several success stories within the ocean of failures. The one thing that is certain is that the realization of the potential of regions (leading to their competitive advantage) strongly depends upon people's ways of thinking, their norms, values, social relationships and their entrepreneurship. An abundance of these ingredients is necessary to foster economic diversification and overcome some of the most serious handicaps.

Several EU and national level strategies aim at overcoming the economic malaise affecting such regions. *Inter alia* these include: direct subsidies, decentralization of governmental agencies, job training programs and subsidized employment schemes. Over the past 15 years, the mainstreaming of creativity and innovation as drivers of economic development has resulted in municipalities exploring "soft" strategies to increase their competitive advantage. This turn largely stems from the academic discourse on the 'creative class' (Florida 2002; Lloyd 2005; Petridou and Ioannides 2012; Zukin 1989).

In Sweden, national cultural policy has been tied to sustainable regional development, whereby "[a]n attractive region with developed natural, cultural, and cultural heritage resources contributes added value to the business environment and furthers the regional competitive power' (Lundström quoted in Petridou and Ioannides 2012: 128). As part of this approach certain communities focus on art-related strategies as a means of raising their profile. At the same time, these communities seek to increase their attractiveness as livable spaces. This research is an evaluation of one such strategy.

## Project Description and Aim

Our study focused on an art project (Konstgödning) comprising nine constituent projects respectively targeting each of the county of Jämtland's eight municipalities (the municipality of Berg had two projects). The entire project centers on linkages between art and place and specifically, the *in situ* co-production of art by the inhabitants of each municipality.

The project did not promote the production of art for direct economic growth, nor did it entail the production of art for art's sake. Rather, the aim of the co-production of art *in situ* was that rural inhabitants would be able to feel that positive energy was produced; that their rural realities were seen as important and deserving attention, and finally that the act of producing art had made a positive difference in these realities. In other words, the main purpose of the project was to engender dialogue about place, about what it means to occupy space in the outskirts of Europe and to bring increased attention to the realities of uneven development. Importantly, the production of art is used as a vehicle to highlight the positive elements of each place instead of pinpointing the usual complaints about living in a peripheral place such as bad connectivity to the capital and lack of services of general interest. Another purpose of Konstgödning is reflected in its name—Art-fertilization— or the explicit notion that this dialogue continues and develops in substance and intensity. A main concern of the project managers from the beginning and a criterion for selecting artists for the constituent projects was the continuation of the dialogue beyond the life of project.

### Method and Evaluation

Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews and email correspondence. We attended the meetings between the project managers and the artists and the closing event in September, 2016. Extensive interviews were conducted with the project managers as well. The criteria we use to evaluate the success of the project stemmed from a workshop conducted in 2015 in which the project managers shared their thoughts, ambitions and aims with us.

First, we asked whether all the constituent projects were completed and whether they delivered the event the artists promised. We then evaluated the project based on expectations outlined by the project managers. These expectations had a threefold perspective: the perspective of the inhabitant, that of the artist and finally the one of the project manager. The inhabitants were expected to perceive their participation as meaningful both as a group and as a collective (the village). The artist was also expected to judge their contribution as valuable and perhaps be interested in more projects in the

periphery. The managers expected that the project would create a dialogue that would continue beyond the life of the project.

## Description of Constituent Projects

This section is an account of the nine projects in eight municipalities.

### 1. Municipality of Berg: Route 321

Artists: Alva Marlen Ljusberg and Henrik Ljusberg. The venue chosen by the artists is a stretch of road (route 321) between the communities of Hoverberg and Myrviken. The choice of venue reflects the choice of art —street art— mostly produced and consumed in marginalized, in-between urban spaces. Whereas such interstices in an urban context usually connote abandonment by capital and urban decay, route 321 for the artists was a connector-canvas, a linkage between the two communities. What is more, this stretch of road is on the way to Åre, one of the most popular ski resorts in Sweden.

The aim of this constituent art project was twofold. It encompassed that which we see, and that which occurs. What we see, the art itself, was meant to have a loud and powerful voice. The fact that the periphery (or at least this periphery) adopted a kind of art associated with the urban aimed at increasing the volume of the residents' voices in stating that people live here, too. That which we see leads to that which occurs, which was a dialogue among the residents not only about the space they inhabit, but also about what art produced in that space would (or should) look like and what public art would look like? With a view to making space more livable, the object of discussion and the gaze of the residents and the visitors was the graffiti, which in turn threw a wrench in, and provoked, the way we view peripherality.

The intended output comprised (i) graffiti on three barns; (ii) an event in the community where the inhabitants were active participants; (iii) graffiti workshops for children and young people, and (iv) the integration of (graffiti) art in the planning vision for the municipality as a way of making concrete inroads into a creative future. Preparatory work included several meetings with the municipality and interest groups from both communities to ensure that the residents were on board. The majority of the intended output was realized with the exception of the third barn, which was not painted. Dialogue with both communities (Hoverberg and Myrviken) regarding further meetings is ongoing, though the artists, in reflection, state that it would have been easier, perhaps, to focus on one community. The difficulties rested with cooperation among communities, which is an issue well documented in the planning literature.

### 2. Marntallsåsen

Artists: Karin Alfredsson and Michael Sundberg. Alfredsson and Sundberg made a film about a nature reserve in the municipality of Berg, which was meant to be a portrait of the

area in personal terms. The artists aimed at showcasing the inhabitants of the nature reserve, the collective memory of the present and the past, as well as the lights and sounds sharing that space. The project was completed on time, however, the resident aspect is not applicable in this project since the reserve is not inhabited. What is more, there is no indication that the dialogue initiated in this project would continue in the future.

### 3. Municipality of Bräcke: Sundsjö

Artist: Vanja Steinholtz. The project involved local residents forming a choir as well as writing and performing music during a summer festival event in 2015. Vanja was the only artist without any direct personal connection to the municipality in which she worked. Therefore, she had to content with the issue of the young-Stockholmite-expert-artist imposing their know-how on the non-expert countryside folk--- a common core-periphery power imbalance image. She was aware that she had to maintain a balance between guiding and imposing while allowing people to express themselves without confining them to the “one right way” of writing and performing a music piece. Steinholtz describes this as the most difficult aspect of her project:

“I don’t really want to come in and give orders and say ‘you need this and that from me’. At the same time this can be a little unclear and rather fuzzy for the people there when I say ‘no, it is you who will decide the content’ and people go ‘ok...?’ and think that is tiresome to not have clear boundaries” (Steinholtz, 2015, n.p.).

The choir was formed through “conversation workshops”, where residents talked in groups about things important to them. The topics of discussion revolved around place: what would people miss if they moved away, what they miss where they live now. The same issues kept coming up; sometimes the discussion became quite political and participants started to talk about how the rural is an afterthought in Swedish politics, how jobs disappear only to be replaced by nuclear power plants and wind turbines. Even so, there was more to the conversation than expressing dissatisfaction about the economic decline of rurality. In one of those workshops which took place in late May, 2015, Vanja described how participants just talked about the beauty of the surroundings— “connecting to place in a lyrical and emotional fashion” (Steinholtz, 2015, n.p.).

Though the choir performance was the focal point of the festival which took place in Tavnäs on August 15, 2015, a host of local artisans also participated, including artists and local food producers. Steinholtz has expressed a will for the group to continue beyond the life of the project, but it is unclear if concrete steps have been taken to ensure this.

### 4. Municipality of Härjedalen: Hede

Artist: Bodil Halvarson. This project sought to create meeting spaces between newly arrived asylum seekers and established Hede inhabitants. Whereas the asylum seekers came from Eritrea and Syria, the long-term Hede residents were ethnic Swedes. Halvarson

turned to the local SFI<sup>1</sup> instructors for help in recruiting individuals from the immigrant community. She contacted the church and the local village association for help in recruiting residents. Because Halvarson's family comes from the area, she also enlisted friends and relatives in this effort. The result was 14 participants in a series of meetings between recent immigrants and long-time Hede residents, each lasting between 2.5 and 3 hours.

Halvarson says: "I wanted to explore how art as a tool might interest people to share their stories with each other and by taking an active, physical and creative part in each other's stories could become part of each other's life and memory." (Halvarson, 2015, n.p.). Each of the participants produced a piece of art and though that piece was the tangible product of the meeting, the aim was to get people talking. Halvarson provided a set of questions as general guidance, which some participants followed whereas others did not. Notably, she herself did not actively participate in the meetings; she sat in the back and took notes as the meetings were not transcribed. It was the voice of the recent arrivals and the longtime residents she wanted people to hear; she functioned as a facilitator, an amplifier.

One would perhaps expect that the narratives would mostly come from the asylum seekers, however the co-production of art becomes the grammar of mutual story-telling. Hede residents, both recent and ones who had lived there all their lives, came together to share their stories and experiences. These stories, along with the art produced during the meetings and photographs of the participants comprise an exhibition that is being displayed in area libraries. Halvarson has presented her project to different audiences outside events organized by Konstgödning. What is more, she forged friendships with the project participants. Halvarson herself is haunted by the tiny green clay boat Hussein made to tell his story. She has exhibited the artefact in a prominent place, along with the rest of the art that was produced during the meetings, on several occasions.

## 5. Municipality of Krokomb: Kluk

Artist: Martin Johansson. Johansson's work drew from his experience as an artist and a director. The project consisted of a series of meetings in Kluk, where the women of Kluk told their stories to each other. It is important here to note that the storytelling was intended mainly for the consumption of the participants. There was a sold out event in Kluk on May 23, 2015, but otherwise these women would not come to Östersund, the county capital, to perform. If one wanted to listen to them, then one had to also see the space they inhabited. This pride of place, evident in the women's narratives, lent a certain urban ephemerality to the event as no video exists—like a Springsteen concert in Gothenburg or a Madonna

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<sup>1</sup> Swedish language instruction for immigrants, provided by the Swedish state at no cost to the students

event in Melbourne. If one is not there to watch it, one misses it. What does exist, however, is a book with the women's stories.

They sat around the table the table, some spoke in the local dialect. They talked about their families, where they come from, trips they took. One woman speaks of how her mother died when she was four weeks old in the late 1940s and her father had to raise her and the half-brother from her mother's previous relationship and also take care of the farm all by himself. Another cites her journal entry from a trip to Kenya in which, all too familiarly to those of us who journal, she apologizes for not having written recently—it had been too hot; a third says she grew up in Springfield, Missouri, which incidentally is the city we, the authors of this paper, lived for a large portion of our adult lives. These narratives were human snapshots, distinct voices, connections, borne out of the act of talking about oneself, not exactly self-evident in the Swedish periphery where the closest neighbor can be miles away.

Johansson wanted to bring the female voices of Kluk forward and to distinguish them from the masculine hunting-and-fishing image of the area. The women forged bonds that have outlived the event in May of 2015, in line with the goals of the project in general and his constituent project in particular.

## 6. Municipality of Ragunda: Skyttmon

Artist: Sara Helene Gedda. The project was titled "If we Seize Being Here" and interrogates the relationship of the inhabitants with the forest. Gedda chose the location because of the historic resistance of the municipality against illegal exploitation (in Swedish *bäggböleriet*) of the forested areas for timber in the 1800s. This concept was the departure point for this project and Gedda wanted to see if it made a difference in the way the current inhabitants of the municipality viewed the forest. We have to note here that the forest is a large part of the identity of Northern Sweden (Norrland) in general and the county of Jämtland in particular. The forest is a source of income through timber exploitation as well as tourism. Concomitantly, the forest is also a source of recreation; people hike, camp, hunt, pick berries. These factors also make forested areas contested spaces, claimed by diverse and divergent interests.

Gedda met with the residents of Skyttmon for a total of about ten times. Some people came once, others came more often. Despite her original purpose of focusing on the forest, she allowed the residents to stir the narrative and the art that was produced as a result. Several issues emerged as much more important than the forest per se, though inextricably tied to it. These included the self-image of the residents in relation to where they lived and the tensions between core and periphery, e.g. why the distance from Stockholm to Östersund is longer than the other way around.

Gedda managed to attract a divergent pool of people, which is unusual as timber and hunting interests rarely sit at the table. The residents of Skyttmon had a voice and they used it to tell the story of what it meant to live there. They did so during the meetings and at the final event of the constituent project, but most importantly in the book curated by Gedda. The narratives of the residents, journalists and researchers were accompanied by photographs they took, all telling the story of the interaction of place with the people who lived and experienced it.

The project finished on time and produced a tangible artefact (the book) but it is unclear whether the residents have continued meeting.

## 7. Viken-Ankarede, Municipality of Strömsund

Artist: Ger Andersson. In a vein similar to the project by Alva Ljusberg and Henrik Ljusberg, Andersson chooses a corridor as his canvas, the area of 25 km as the crow flies between Viken's chapel and Ankarede in Frostviken, to erect seven pillars in the shape of the Big Dipper if looked from above. Distinctly spiritual, these pillars are made of polished wood with a glass upper part. The material has both a symbolic and a functional purpose. The wood represents the connection of the Sami people as well as the local farmers with woodwork and celestial objects. What is more, Andersson's purpose is for these pillars to be able to be captured by Google Earth, connecting the peripheral extreme local to the digital vastness of the global in an effort to turn core-periphery perceptions on their head.

Not all the pillars were installed by December, 2015. Andersson plans for all seven pillars to be up by spring, 2016 so that activities connecting them can continue for the next seven years. Andersson plans to engage the public through these activities, which include a midsummer walk passing all seven of them. Andersson does not report any conversations with the residents prior to the pillars' erection.

## 8. Hallen: Municipality of Åre

Artist: Ulla West. West's family comes from the area though she grew up in the west coast of Sweden and then lived in Stockholm for all her adult life, where she is one of the many transplants. Most of the artists had a personal connection with the place they chose to work with, but West's narrative was the most personal one. West says: "[i]n this work, I knot together my own experiences from time to time (sic), from place to place. Lived through time, experience is important in my work and in this project it is my method to empower me along with others on site, by crafting, talking and walking. By collecting stories from the past and from the present" (West, 2015, n.p.).

West's project is twofold: first, she and residents knot a rug. Also, they walk. These are two activities that people do in Hallen and they are vehicles through which people do something together; to co-produce their own map and share their own narratives. The knotting of the rug took place in the Community Center and the rug remained there for

the duration of the project. The rug was a map of hiking trails with Hallen as the departure point and participants knotted their home on that map-rug. West traveled to Hallen every month and every time she went there “things ha[d] happened” and the “rug [was] slowly growing” (West, n.p.).

Interwoven in this project was another, older story about another rug, called the Marby rug. It is said that pilgrims brought this rug to the church in Marby from present day Turkey some 600 years ago. The story of that rug has twists and turns, and this magic carpet seems to crop up in different places, each version different than the last one.

Through this work, West knotted together her own life story with Hallen, the residents of Hallen together as well as a piece of history. From this project, different activities have emerged. Hallen wants to order one or more copies of the Marby rug from Istanbul; the Museum of History in Stockholm is interested in the copies of this rug as well in a cooperation with the Jamtli, the local museum, and West is planning to collect the stories she gleaned from Hallen in a manuscript.

## 9. Lit: Municipality of Östersund

Artist: Po Hagström. The project was called “the others”, originally focused on “otherness” inhabiting the forest and the imagination: ghosts, gnomes, and other fairytale encounters. Hagströms medium was visual art and narrative. Hagström plans on curating a book with narratives from Lit residents broadening the definition of “other”, but until September, 2016, this process had not started.

## Discussion

This section is divided in two parts. First we consider the practicalities of the project and whether the constituent projects fulfilled the formal requirements. We then conduct a deeper discussion regarding the value of art in peripheral areas

Most constituent projects finished on time; the projects in the municipalities of Strömsund and Östersund were well under way, but not completely finished by December, 2015. All nine constituent project had representation in the two-day event in Östersund in September, 2015, an event that attracted a lot of attention from the public, local politicians, public officials and the local art community.

The main purpose of the project managers was to create a meeting space in which to have a dialogue—a dialogue about place, rurality, power and empowerment; about what the past was and what the future holds; about where home is. Additionally, the explicit requirement for all constituent projects was that they lead to further dialogue and a continued relationship among the participants. More specifically, the objective of

Konstgödning had three dimensions: the inhabitant, the artist and the project manager. The inhabitants were expected to perceive their participation as meaningful both as a group and as a collective (the village). The artist was also expected to judge their contribution as valuable and perhaps be interested in more projects in the periphery. The managers expect that the project will create a dialogue that will continue beyond the life of the project. Table 1.1 summarizes the performance of each constituent project in relation to these three dimensions.

		<b>Overall Project Dimensions</b>		
		<i>Inhabitants' perspective (experience project as of value)</i>	<i>Artist's perspective (raise awareness and interest further)</i>	<i>Project Manager's perspective (create a further dialogue)</i>
	<i>Route 321</i>	Yes	Yes	In process
	<i>Marntallsåsen</i>	N/A	Yes	N/A
	<i>Sundsjö</i>	Yes	Yes	Willing, but unclear if realized
	<i>Hede</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Constituent Projects</b>	<i>Kluk</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Skyttmon</i>	Yes	Yes	Willing, but unclear if realized
	<i>Viken-Ankarede</i>	Unclear	Yes	Unclear
	<i>Hallen</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
	<i>Lit</i>	Unclear	Yes	Unclear

Table 1. The constituent projects vis-à-vis the overall project dimensions

## The Value of Art

“Culture does not appear to square with the economy. In particular, art does not mix well with money” (Klamer, 1996, p. 7). If the go-to metric for the assessment of projects is not applicable, how can we make a judgement for the value of art produced within a certain

project? One way is to evaluate the project based on whether it met the objectives outlined at its onset. The discussion above reveals that, by and large, most of the constituent projects met their three-dimensional objective. Some constituent projects were stronger than others, but as a whole Konstgödning delivered on its promise to raise awareness, involve the residents and co-produce positive artistic energy.

The question that emerges, however, is one of scope. In other words, what difference can small projects make? To answer that, we apply counterfactual logic. We ask the question instead: what if this project had not taken place? Turning the argument on its head allows us to shift the focus on what actually occurred and the impact this had on the artists' and the resident/participants' lives, rather on focusing on what did not occur, such as a multitude of jobs or a sudden change of fortunes for the area. Small scale projects are a fit to sparsely populated regions with small-scale activities. These nine constituent projects allowed a number of people to interact and forge relationships; they allowed their stories to be heard, which would not have been the case had the project not taken place.

Moreover, art in Scandinavia and in general and in Sweden in particular is treated by the state as an equalizing factor. Access to the production of art especially is a means of social equality. Everybody should have access to culture regardless of where they live. This project not only allowed people to consume art, but also to produce it.

Finally, art and the act of (co) producing it restores order in an otherwise chaotic world, at least ephemerally. People knot a carpet; they walk and talk to each other. Recent immigrants exchange stories about their lives with longtime residents whom they otherwise might never have met. People are proud of where they live and they sing about it. And just then, things are ordered and clear.

## Conclusions

In this paper we analyzed the art project “Konstgödning” through the evaluation of its nine constituent projects. We did so by critically evaluating each constituent project on three dimensions: the resident, the artist and the project manager dimension. We found that overall Konstgödning delivered on its promise to make the residents feel of value, to interest the artist in the area and perhaps in future projects and to create a dialogue about periphery and what it means to live on the top of the world beyond the end-date of the project.

What is more, argue that the small-scale scope of the project fitted the area and we use counterfactual logic to shore up our argument: what would have happened if the project had not taken place? We find that project such as this make places more livable. In this respect, art is very much relevant.

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