

## Case study

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# Art without walls

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## Background

Atlas Arts develops audiences for contemporary art in the Inner and Outer Hebrides with a team of just two people. Working without a venue, we were hosted for two years by Hi-Arts, sadly now no more, and set afloat in 2012 to become an independent organisation with charitable status.

The artists we commission work in so many different ways but all of them make connections with the contemporary world around them, tapping into the unique qualities of the place. These connections may be social, historical or about the issues that concern our communities.

## Goals

We want to contribute to the cultural life of the Inner and Outer Hebrides by:

- nurturing artistic practice and talent in a way that is sensitive to place and of a high quality
- further developing cultural tourism with art of local, national and international importance
- bringing in new ways of expressing our communities' values and concerns.

## Target audience

It's important that we see the entire community as our audience whether they are hill-walkers or crofters, cruise ship passengers or lifeboat men.

## Connecting with local issues

Crofting is declining on Skye so the community networks that supported it, like stock clubs, are declining too. As part of SpinCycle-Skye, textile artist, Deirdre Wilson, has collected a fleece from every stock club on the island. They are being spun into yarn and from each Deirdre will knit a beautiful pair of socks that express something of the crofter who cared for the sheep that grew the wool. The fleeces have come from different varieties of sheep kept in different parts of the island so the textures and colours of each pair of socks will be different. The socks will be exhibited in local archive centres.

SpinCycle-Skye has so many different layers of resonance: the local skills of crafting, spinning and knitting; the low price crofters get for fleeces nowadays; the tradition of crofters knitting socks to take down to the harbour to sell to the fishermen.

The project is also helping the community with its own fundraising efforts, focusing on a group of Skye men who will row 100 miles from the island of St Kilda to Skye in a boat that was last used in 1913. The Welly Sock Challenge invites anyone who wishes to pick up or download a knitting pattern and knit a pair of socks that will be sold to support the RNLI and Young Carers group. Deirdre Wilson has invited knitters to join her at a local bakery for a knit-in.

We engaged local communities through existing networks like stock clubs and spinning groups, through social media (we have a big response to Facebook posts and tweets, even though broadband and mobile phone signals on the island are poor) and through editorial in local newspapers and community publications.

### **Supporting cultural tourism**

We want to create iconic projects but are relatively poorly-resourced so have to make things stretch. But that stretch can be international.

Portree Area Community Trust (PACT) wanted to inform visitors about the wonderful walks that weren't signposted. J. Maizlish Mole was commissioned through Atlas Arts to create a map. The artist spent two weeks walking every footpath and desire line before hand-drawing painstakingly detailed, scale maps from memory. Half conventional map and half personal commentary, the maps were put on information boards and bus stops. PACT were so delighted, they asked for a map of the whole of Skye to complement the area map.

The Guardian picked up the story and the maps are now [a permanent part of Guardian Online](#).

The project shows how we can work locally to raise the area's profile nationally and internationally.

### **Avoiding stereotypes**

Our communities told us that they were fed up with black and white photographs of their landscape. They wanted something different – colour.

So although we make time for artists to embed themselves in island life, we also make room for those who are totally out-there. An example is Celestial Radio, an early project with Zoe Walker and Neil Bromwich which saw a pirate radio ship encrusted with 60,000 mirror tiles sail into the harbour. The artists had spent three months interviewing locals about hope, visionaries and island life. The moored ship, shimmering like a glitter ball, broadcast an audio guide for people walking around the bay, compiled from those interviews.

## **Key points for effective practice**

Do less, but do it more intensively. Create projects that allow artists to make their own links and get under the skin of a place

Forget the tyranny of the exhibition schedule. Build in breathing space to allow ideas to come from the community. Slow down and allow things to evolve.

Think what you can contribute rather than giving the impression that you are just piggy-backing on things that communities are already doing.

Be a good host. We kick start projects with food and drink, whether it's a carefully choreographed sit-down meal or a gathering in the local bakery. Like this we can bring together the people who might want to get involved in the best possible circumstances for relationships to take root and flourish.

Your understanding of and commitment to the place is vital. Although my last job was at the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Sydney, my father was from Skye. My colleague, Rosie Somerville, has lived and worked in the arts on Skye for 30 years. This gives us a unique combination of knowledge to support artists.