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# The Spiral Gallery: Non-market creativity and belonging in an Australian country town

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A B S T R A C T

This paper seeks to explore creative practice in an Australian country town, and in so doing, to unsettle market-orientated interpretations of creativity that privilege the urban. Instead of focusing on creative practice as a means to develop industries, we focus on how creativity is a means to establish a cooperative gallery space that helps to sustain a sense of self in an otherwise antithetical social and cultural context. The example we discuss is The Spiral Gallery, a women's co-operative arts space established in the 1990s in the small (but somewhat iconic) country town of Bega – in a place where avenues for feminist arts were otherwise absent. We demonstrate the Spiral Gallery does more than showcase creativity in the Bega Valley. In addition, the gallery has become a means to 'becoming' and 'belonging', to cultivate subjects through various practices including sculpture, performance and photography; which in turn enrich cultural life. In this way creativity in rural life comes to be understood as social, performative, visceral and political.

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## 1. Introduction

> 'The creative economy is in two places in Australia – Sydney and Melbourne – that's it'. (Richard Florida, quoted in the Melbourne *Age* newspaper, 22 March 2004)

Critical engagement with policies designed to foster creativity as a mechanism of economic growth is an important strand of recent urban geographical analyses. However, in the case of rural creativity only recently have attempts been made to address the field's urban bias (Anwar McHenry, 2011; Bell and Jayne, 2010; Harvey et al., 2012; Gibson, 2012; Kneafsey et al., 2001; Luckman et al., 2009). The emerging field of rural creativity has indicated the importance of arts and crafts sectors to rural competitiveness in the United Kingdom (Collins, 2004; Matarasso, 2005). However, still lacking is a sense of what alternative conceptualisations of creativity are possible to those that focus on certain forms of urban, market-dominated activities (Florida, 2002; Landry, 2001). Our contention is that, internationally, contemporary regional economic policy debates are overly biased towards particular conceptions of urban creativity. Creative industries policy scripts informed by the work of Florida (2002) and Landry (2001) are exemplified by the ostensibly omnipresent so-called 'edgy' urban neighbourhood that fosters creativity by creating the correct 'feel' or 'atmosphere'; what Florida (2002, p. 283) termed 'people climate'. In rethinking the relationship between creativity, people and place, we challenge Florida's astonishing generalisation above about creativity in Australia that obscures how the creative economy plays out differently beyond the metropolis.

In this paper we build on the rural creativity agenda beyond the metropolis outlined by Bell and Jayne (2010) by presenting findings from empirical research undertaken at the Spiral Gallery, in Bega, New South Wales, Australia. To do so we draw on Gibson-Graham's (2006, p. 24) reading of William Connelly (1999, 2002) that points towards the need to understand the significance of the processes through which economic subjects are created, 'an active politics of becoming' and requisite 'fugitive energies' within the nexus of intertwined relationships that comprise space. We understand creativity as a field of choices and possibilities that are set up in the tensions between being and becoming. Gibson-Graham's work helps us reflect on how the desire for new economic identities are energised through the interplay of the visceral, performative and embodied subjects, rather than a structural vision of economic determination. We focus on the spatialities of interpersonal relations and the day-to-day spatial practices and imaginings which fashion to the gallery space. We argue that nowhere is more creative than any other place; that 'creativity' is more than just the basis of economic growth through a prescribed list of market sectors;

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and, rather, that 'creativity' is a set of desires, gut reactions, ideas and actions – an outcome of a particular knowledge practice that is at the same time social, performative, affective and political.

Our paper begins by exploring the wider literature on the geographies of the cultural economy. We establish the need to challenge the contemporary spatial and economic framing of creativity. Subsequent parts of the paper discuss our fieldwork in the Bega Valley, and the production of a feminist cooperative arts space established by a group of five women in the 1990s. The Spiral Gallery is inserted in both the formal market economy, through paying rent, and in alternative economic formations, through promoting activities outside capitalist market transactions. Examples of non-market economic transactions at the Spiral Gallery include: the voluntary labour of 'sitters' that open the gallery six days a week; participation in an alternative currency system of 'Sapphires' that fosters sustainability and interdependency within the Bega Valley Local Exchange Trading System; setting of prices to enhance the sustainability of the cooperative; and 'openings' that foster engagement with artistic creativity rather than profit maximisation. This case study confronts concerns expressed elsewhere in regional policy discourses about the lack of creativity beyond Australian metropolitan centres (National Economics, 2002). We demonstrate that the Spiral Gallery does much more than just showcase creativity – in addition, the gallery operates as a space to facilitate and legitimise the subjectivities of women and men as artists, to socialise, to earn an income (whether through cash or local trading schemes), to form new community networks, and to generate a sense of 'belonging' based on reciprocal relationships of care.

## 2. Approaches to creativity

Early analysis of creativity in geography was on 'new industrial spaces' catalysed by new growth sectors such as film, music and design that were driven by logics unlike those from previous industrial eras (Scott, 1984; Christopherson and Storper, 1986). Themes to emerge from the geographies of creative industries included: agglomeration effects, clusters, externalities, entrepreneurship, and networks (Power and Scott, 2004; Reimer et al., 2008). A related literature grew in urban studies examining creative industries and urban regeneration effects, including discussion of gentrification and social displacement, the politics of urban entrepreneurial governance, renewal schemes focused on cultural districts/quarters/precincts and urban village strategies (Hutton, 2009; Bell and Jayne, 2004; Evans, 2001). Popular bestselling books by Florida (2002) and Landry (2001) offered accessible ways to understand and trumpet creativity within an urban policy-making 'script' – developing tool-kits for urban reinvention through creativity that quickly spread in the policy-making world. Gibson and Kong (2005) outline how 'scripts' for economic development emphasised new categories of the cultural industries and micro-economic characteristics of 'cool' places: tolerance, entrepreneurial talent, the 'buzz' of city life, bohemia, cosmopolitanism, and 'hip' consumerism. Of relevance here, is Papastergiadis' (2006, p. 135) reminder that art galleries were 'increasingly subsumed in the new categories of the cultural industries.'

Such analysis of creativity fits uneasily with our empirical analysis. First, there is the general point about the emphasis on creative *industries* rather than creative practices more broadly (Pope, 2005). The particular forms of creativity especially valued in policy-making are those central to capitalist market sectors (Gibson and Klocker, 2005). Thus, Ettlinger (2010) argued that analysis of creativity ought to account for ethnographies of creativity in the everyday context. A growing body of work has sought to decentre definitions of creativity, that is mindful of the presence of creative processes in all manner of jobs and circumstance in communities, families and social networks – hence Christmas lights, tattooing, gardening, Elvis impersonation, whip-making and custom car design are all outlets for creative inspiration (Edensor et al., 2009; Warren and Gibson, 2011).

The second concern we draw attention to here is the application of creativity indexes and audits that typically involve combining multiple quantitative variables into a single place-based 'score', for comparative purposes (Gibson and Klocker, 2005; Christophers, 2007). Exactly what is meant by 'creativity' (Cunningham, 2004), and in what ways might our imagined concepts of creativity (and the baggage that comes with the term) refract academic and policy assessments of the relationship between creative practice and place. For example, in Australia, the National Economics (2002) creativity index mapping research applied Florida's (2002) index, and then produced policy discourses that portrayed inner-city regions of Sydney and Melbourne as 'creative hubs' with cultural vitality and excitement (a 'happening place to be'). The corollary was that creativity was considered 'absent' in poorly-scoring inland agricultural regions, which were tarred with discourses of lack, stagnation, decay, boredom (Gibson and Klocker, 2005). Consequently, prescriptive policy recommendations were made requiring resource transfers to 'create attractive, diverse, open societies which are so important for success in the innovation focused global economy' (National Economics, 2002, p. 127). Furthermore, Australian census data variables on employment in creative industries used in such indexes are notoriously unreliable given that much creative work is unpaid in places remote for metropolitan centres, even professional-quality work (Brennan-Horley and Gibson [2009] cite the example that the entire Darwin Symphony Orchestra in Australia's Northern Territory is made up of volunteer performers). Creativity outside big cities may go unnoticed simply because it takes different forms, whether in terms of craft production (Collins, 2004), or, as part of the innovation cycle within agricultural industries (Sorensen, 2009). Creativity may not be so 'lacking' in the rural context after all (Gibson, 2002; Cloke, 2007; Connell and Rugendyke, 2010; Scott, 2010). Indeed, in the Australian context there exists considerable historical weight behind rural creative traditions – in visual art (some of the country's most distinguished artists have been located in, and painted depictions of, rural landscapes: the Heidelberg School, Norman Lindsay, Pro Hart, Sidney Nolan, Fred Williams – see Andersen, 2010), festivals (Gibson and Connell, 2012), music (especially Aboriginal traditional and contemporary music – see Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, 2004), sculpture (Connell and Rugendyke, 2010), and even postcards (Mayes, 2010a). From the perspective of rural Australian creative life, the persistent urban bias in creativity research appears decidedly strange.

Third, we wish to point out the role of geography, and in particular the relational qualities of place. Empirical studies in rural contexts reveal difficulties of overcoming centripetal forces in particular creative industries – struggling against the flows of people, capital and opportunities that centralise power in metropolitan settings (Andersen, 2010). Centripetal forces featured in Bennett's (2010) work on classical musicians for whom migration from remote and rural places to known centres of creative activity was a must for professional career development; this further contributed to rural youth out-migration and lamentations for loss of talent and leadership. And yet, counter to this is the importance of rural geographies, as a context for creativity (McAuley and Fillis, 2005). For example, Gibson et al. (2010) provide evidence from Darwin in the Northern Territory, Australia, that remoteness from metropolitan centres enabled distance from 'faddish' urban culture and triggered new kinds of creative 'making-do' with information

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