



Issue #2 February 2025

fount

From Source to Production Contemporary & Historical Creative
Output and Cultures of Rural and Remote Scotland.

Studio Practice as Publication | Mridula Basi and the Birnam Studio Gallery

Architecture as Publication | Birnam Arts, the Building and the Gallery





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Louisa Preston



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Preston.

fount magazine locates and highlights creative practices in a range of arts disciplines situated in remote and rural Scotland.

fount explores the relationships in and between the creative processes involved in contemporary cultural production and the localised and global community efforts to sustain economies, cultures and the environment.

fount is seeking contributions for future issues
To enquire about making a submission or for more information email louisa.preston@stir.ac.uk or visit www.researchtown.uk

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editorial

*fount** is formed of a personal agenda to showcase the creative sources and processes that form art and culture in remote and rural parts of Scotland.

fount explores the cultural networks located outside the urban-centric contemporary art and literary circuits nationally and internationally. *fount* seeks out the practices of artists, publishers, writers, the organisations that support them. It investigates the ideas beneath and aims to showcase the work of individuals and organisations involved.

The first issue, #1, was the proof of concept. That mock-up was intended to illustrate the concept for *fount* which is housed on my website, [Research Town](#), where I collect, document and write about aspects of my experimental artist-publisher research practice.

This issue, #2, is the first of three planned issues connected with a research project titled, 'Contemporary Art-Publishing Ecosystems of Remote and Rural Scotland', supported by a Carnegie Trust Research Incentive Grant and conducted from the University of Stirling (2024-2025). Within these pages you can expect to find an exploration of emerging research themes tied to: concepts of publishing practice; different categories and formats of publication; and their roles in, or connections with, efforts to generate culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable communities.

For those living in, or visiting, Scotland who have an interest in contemporary art, literature and publishing, this publication is for you. The academics amongst us, the creative practitioners, and in fact anyone interested in, or participating in the being, making and doing of books and art and culture will be most interested in the contents of these pages.

This issue proposes the concept of architectural space as a publication in Birnam, Perthshire. The features on Birnam Arts (BA) and the Birnam Studio Gallery focus on their built spaces. In considering their buildings which house the gathering of a public and a range of creative practices, can the suggestion that architectural space as a structure in place of the book's cover, pages and binding which contains the content of spoken conversations, presentations, and printed ephemera (such as the postcard, the poster, the café menu and the poetry on the walls) be uncovered?

This issue considers, if architectural space is a publication, then would the distribution be via the recommendations to others to go and visit, through the chats in the café replicated in habitual practices of some people who like to have a coffee and a blether after walking the dog, or meet to catch up at lunch?

Welcome to *fount*, keep reading, you might find more than you first expect.

Louisa Preston.

Photograph of the 18th century Dalguise Pillar thought to have once been a market cross, situated inside Birnam Arts, 2024. Image, Louisa Preston.

* found in Scots, a spring, a source or a fountain, and a variant of font – a box or set of letters in one size and style creating a typeface.



Birnam Studio Gallery

Mridula Basi's Birnam Studio Gallery is a public studio where you can feel free to choose from a long menu of loose-leaf teas or your favourite type of coffee, then sit and feel snugly wrapped in an envelope of creativity and comfort as you watch folk pass by in the main street outside. Louisa Preston met with Basi in Autumn 2024 to chat about making art in a space which functions somewhere in between a private studio, and a public gallery and café.



Inside view of Birnam Studio Gallery showing Basi's works on the walls and the floor to ceiling height windows, 2024. Image, Louisa Preston.

Basu came to Birnam in the summer of 2020. She was drawn to the space that she works in now by the high ceilings, which she felt were perfect for making her works on larger canvases. In her previous space she had to limit the size of her work due to the size of her work space. The Birnam Studio Gallery is situated in the former Robin Baker Architects office, a practice that he ran for 16 years. Having leased the space for a number of years Mridula grasped the opportunity to buy the space in 2024.

In the early years of working in this space Mridula spoke of the privacy that being in Birnam and working in the Birnam Studio Gallery lent her as the village had little to no footfall during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. She set up easels in the space and stacked her paintings against the wall much like a usual studio space. The biggest difference however with this space is that three of the walls are comprised of floor to ceiling height windows. Initially, Mridula said she would hide behind the canvases on easels that she placed in the window and make her work. Then, Mridula began making work in the space enjoying the fact that she could observe the community passing by outside and feel part of that community without the interaction. After a while Mridula started to receive notes through the door asking if she could move a certain work back into view from the outside for people walking by. This slowly began to change her work. Mridula had started off wishing to create a private space but it became a space that she could open for people to view with no compulsion to sell.

Mridula began hanging her finished works on the wall which face you as you enter the space. She

said it was a "terrible feeling to see her work on the wall". However, when she was making and being in the space she liked to look out through the windows where she would continue to create the work from this perspective. We discussed how this was a nice analogy for the timeline of the work with completed works behind her and works yet to be finished in front of her arranged in the space on easels – almost like when reading a book, the pages are behind and the pages yet to be read are in front. This main back wall with the paintings hung up and arranged in the way that they are, seems to me like they are laid out on the page of a book in contrast with the works in progress. As the COVID-19 lockdowns began to ease, Mridula would observe people taking photographs of their journey through the village to wherever they were going. Some visitors came in and asked if they could do a live cast from the space, another form of publishing.

For Mridula, publicly making her work in this studio gallery has never been a performance. She told me about how she has never been interested in being a performance artist. She noticed that people were not so interested in her but in what was happening in the space. People would come in and conversations would start and it was at this point while social distancing was still in place that they began to serve tea and coffee.

Previously in Mridula's practice she had not been privy to the audience experience or their feedback. Having a gallerist who set the agenda to a degree of what the work or collection of works would comprise she felt that the production was divorced from the display processes for her. This new type of engagement for Mridula brought a personal exchange to »»



>>> the selling of works that revealed to her at times why the buyer liked it, and even where they planned to hang it in their home. She started to hear how her work had transformed the buyer's life in unexpected ways such as how the work changed when situated in their home on a certain wall, in a certain room. During these interactions with people in the space Mridula began to notice that her work slowly became influenced by people's discussions and observations of the work being made.

Birnam is "a polite place in the sense that it does not force you to slow down, you just slow down by yourself"



Above: Ink pen sketch of Mridula Basi and a visitor, made after spending time chatting in the Birnam Studio Gallery, September 2024. Image, Louisa Preston.

Drawing has been a constant in Mridula's practice. She began her professional career as an illustrator for children's books, but often felt restricted by the briefs that were set. She couldn't fulfil her vision for the works often and she decided to become a studio artist instead to create her own structure free from briefs set by others.

I asked Mridula if in coming to a small village like Birnam, she felt that the community had helped her to establish herself as an artist within this community more clearly, to which she replied, "yes absolutely, but you still have to make a choice, when a community around your studio space or your workspace recognises you as being part of their community and then also recognises the fact that it adds to the diversity in their community in terms of different things that different people do and they feel kind of richer by it".

In terms of the judgement made of the quality of Mridula's work, she

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has moved away from the goal of gaining reputation in the wider art world and instead moves towards a recognition for the work that she does as part of the Birnam community. She speaks of having no big goals but of going from one day to the next and giving her time to that lifestyle. However, from



Above: Ink pen and watercolour sketch made sitting in the Birnam Studio Gallery, September 2024. Image, Louisa Preston.

this humbling statement there also appears a bigger role than Mridula I think recognises which is that of providing people in the community with an opportunity to grow or develop their ideas or their work, to rest or to pause by being in the space. Creative people are drawn to this space.

On the other hand, Mridula tells me that some people come in and don't look up because they are on their phone. As we discussed though, it takes all kinds of people to make a community. The effect however of being situated in Birnam for Mridula is that, Birnam is "a polite place in the sense that it does

not force you to slow down, you just slow down by yourself".

The content of this feature is based on a research interview that I conducted with Basi on Thursday 26th September 2024. The drawings were made as part of research gathering time spent in Birnam between the 23rd and the 27th September 2024. I use drawing to capture and document visual and emotive aspects of the experiences of the doing of research. Drawings, such as these shown here, supplement reflective and descriptive writing, photographs, experimental publications such as the [memory poetry comic](#), the zine (a

do-it-yourself publication produced in low numbers and distributed in alternative networks to the main publishing industry) and the traditional interview.

See <https://mridulabasi.co.uk> for more information on Birnam Studio Gallery.



The Birnam Institute / Birnam Arts



Photograph of the original Birnam Institute Building and the new extension creating the current Birnam Arts Organisation venue, 2024. Image, Louisa Preston.

I spent from August to September being and working in Birnam Arts (BA) putting together an exhibition titled, “[Experimental Publishing](#)” which ran from the 19th October to 24th November 2024. I have a personal history with this building. I performed there in a Christmas pantomime as a teenager. I don’t know why. I am a naturally shy person and not keen for voluntary public drama performances, but maybe that’s a learned idea from my adult life. Anyway, since my schooldays, the building has been developed

with a new part added. An information board inside the building tells us that Birnam Arts began life as the Birnam Institute which came about due to a successful Working Men’s Club, founded in 1876. The original building was completed in 1883 with a library and reading room for local people to come and sit and meet. A pale blue Birnam Heritage Walk plaque on the wall at the entrance of the building says, “Birnam Institute 1883, Built to create a community facility for ‘education and entertainment’ Briefly housed >>>



>> public baths. Extended 2000". The Birnam Institute was founded by the local train stationmaster John Kinnaid, who gathered the funds to support the construction of the building from local benefactors. The building has served the community ever since and it has had many more benefactors too. The building as a result has an old and new part which are interlinked in an interesting way.

The café space is the heart of this new version of what is now called Birnam Arts. The new entrance is used in the warmer months as it has an automatic door and the older entrance with smaller doors that are pushed on a swing hinge are used in the colder months to help keep the heat in. I observed deliveries coming and the café staff accepting them

on behalf of the other staff in the building. The reception area is manned at intervals, and usually in the evenings, as BA is a small organisation with limited staffing capacity. The café staff do a nice job of giving a warm welcome as you walk round the corner from the traditional entrance into the café though when there is no one to greet you at the reception. People entering the building from the new entrance find themselves directly in the café space. The ceiling is double height to a roof light window which traverses across the length of the space. The result is a light and airy space which is sometimes however a bit echoey. The coffee grinder is persistent at busy times, but this

adds to the general bustling sounds on those days. In quieter days though it becomes a beacon of the fact that coffee is the lifeblood of the people inhabiting and visiting this space. Time feels somehow slowed in this building and in Birnam. BA, as do most of the shops in Birnam, opens at 10am and closes at 4pm (these may have been winter season hours). Nevertheless, early visitors to the BA seem to be local dog walkers meeting for a coffee or hillwalkers arriving off the train and looking for some brunch before heading out on their hike.

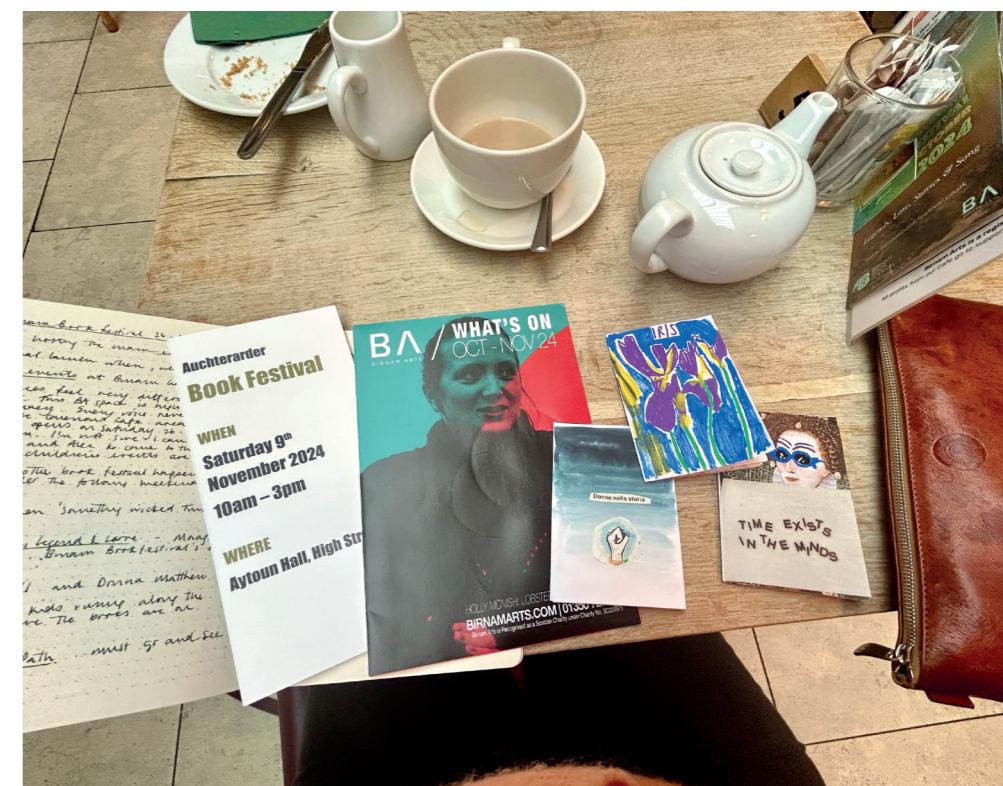
The coffee makers and carriers of the cups and mugs full of this important elixir to the visitors are a key component of conversation

enabling, a customary habit. As such I found myself wondering if the building itself, the way that it is arranged and the contact that it enables through conversations in the café space, performances of theatre, poetry readings, music and dancing in the main hall and the viewing of the artworks in the gallery space as well as the creative making happening in the workshop, the posters on the wall advertising the upcoming events can all be considered as the contents of the publication of BA with the building providing the structure for it all to happen in. The exterior walls could be considered as the publication cover, protecting the contents from the weather, housing them in a pre-defined organisation of meeting

rooms, performance spaces, studio workshops spaces, a place to learn about the author Beatrix Potter and the history of her connections with Birnam and Dunkeld, and a place to shop for interesting books, prints, pieces of jewellery and of course Beatrix Potter books! - all arranged according to the design by the architect. The interior walls of each room could be considered as the edges of each page, a page being the contents of a given enclosed space. The content of course being the performances, the discussions, the gathering and meeting, watching and taking part, listening, sitting and reading. The number of copies I imagine are more difficult to quantify. Any given day the types of conversations, performances

could be different. The number of performances of a given touring band, theatre production or author tour that the BA are included in could be considered however as a certain number of copies of publication, albeit being performed in different locations. It is perhaps easier to think about the number of copies being the number of people who have entered the BA building and experienced what there is on offer.

As an example of the creative workshops that can be attended, I facilitated a zine workshop where people could come and have a go at making one of these delightfully accessible publications out of one sheet of paper. The paper is folded in such a way that a simple >>



Photographs from left to right: the outside view looking towards the Beatrix Potter exhibition inside the new extended part of the building; inside view of the café space on the ground floor and the gallery space above with a long roof window letting lots of light in and; a view of my table after some tea and cake and reading some leaflets I gathered, as well as some zines I made during my research time in Birnam, 2024. Images, Louisa Preston.



>>> 6-page plus cover booklet can be re-produced easily using a photocopier and distributed by hand or posted through the mail network. Gathered round a large table in the BA studio we each worked to cut out pieces of text and images of interest for our respective zine in progress. A variety of pens and inks were used as well as different kinds of patterned and coloured papers. In this process of making, discussions flowed, and a sociable production experience ensued. Focusing on the experience of making, the architecture—in this case the workshop environment—enabled the publishing experience of making the zines, which in some cases is often valued and remembered more by participants than the zine itself.

To visit Birnam Arts and for more information see:
www.birnamarts.com
Text: Louisa Preston.



Image above: 'Sock it to me' zine in the making, below left: zines in progress, 2024. Images, Helen Reid.



Directory

Making Publics Press
ATLAS Arts
PO Box 6318
Portree,
Isle of Skye
IV51 0AF
► www.atlasarts.org.uk

The Atholl Gallery
6 Atholl Street, Dunkeld, Perthshire
PH8 0AR
Mon-Sun, 11.00 - 17.00
► www.athollgallery.co.uk

Birnam Arts
Station Road
Birnam
Dunkeld
PH8 0DS
Tel: 01350 727 674
► www.birnamarts.com

Birnam Studio / Gallery
Tower Buildings
Station Road
Birnam
Dunkeld
Perthshire
PH8 0DS
► www.mridulabasi.co.uk

The Birnam Reader Bookshop
Station Road
Birnam
PH8 0DS
► www.facebook.com/thebirnamreader/

The Blue Magpie
1a Brae Street
Dunkeld
► www.facebook.com/BraeStDunkeld

The Bridge
Community Newsletter
► www.dunkeldandbirnamnews.co.uk

Katn Kat
St Ninians Wynd
Dunkeld
PH8 0AT
► www.facebook.com/katnkatdunkeld

Mary Arnold-Forster Architects
23 Atholl Street
Dunkeld
PH8 0AR
► www.maryarnold-forster.co.uk

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This issue of *fount* can also be printed at the Making Publics Press in ATLAS Arts, Portree, Isle of Skye.

Founder, editor, design and layout
Louisa Preston
louisa.preston@stir.ac.uk

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*found in Scots, a spring, a source or a fountain, and a variant of font—a box or set of letters in one size and style creating a typeface.