

Being Margin: Orford Ness-ness

Orford, surely, possesses a peculiar and distinct marginality that belies geographical logic. Although Woodbridge and Melton are nearby, the span of landscape from those settlements to Orford can, when traversed over country roads, seem oddly longer than the actual mileage suggests. Even in Orford itself, the short walk from, say, the Watch House up to the square and the castle appears further than one expects as if spatial proximity has become elasticated and elongated. Perhaps, then, there are moments when Orford even manages to be distant from itself, a place where—inverting Nicholas of Cusa's famous remark—the centre is nowhere and its periphery everywhere.

But there is more. Standing on the quayside and looking towards the dilapidated buildings on the Ness, it's quickly recognizable that one is positioned on something like the inner lining of a margin; further afield, there on a horizon made visible by the ghostly outlines of architectural remnants, is the margin's outer lining. All in all, the temptation is to conclude that Orford less occupies a margin than is a margin.

Margins have, at least, a double character. On the one hand, they constitute a boundary between one space and another, just as the margin of a sheet of paper or picture frame demarcates the artwork from the surrounding wall. Sometimes that margin-as-boundary is ostensibly protective, like the city walls separating the invading army outside from the besieged people inside. That boundary can often be reconfigured as a border, leading towards all manner of political questions. On the other hand, the margin is a point of contact, the place—no matter how small or slim—where two spaces meet, touch and are touched by one another.

In that second sense, that meeting of discrete spaces or entities can alter into an exchange or chiasmus in which the margin becomes hazy, porous, and in which inside and outside become fused or confused. Perceiving the margin or boundary as point of contact rather than separation invites the positive possibility of comprehending the small channel of water between Orford and Orford Ness as a condition of access from one place to the other as opposed to a barrier.

Orford and the Ness demonstrates both aspects—boundary and contact—of marginality. The tall structure of the castle serves both as welcoming landmark seen from the water and as warning. (Indeed, its usage in the film *Witchfinder General* as a space where frenzied vengeance occurs neatly encapsulates the darkness in its heart.) Strange things, too, can happen at these points of contact; folkloric tales of the Wild Man almost suggest a bridging amid dimensions (and just down the road we, of course, have the weird tale of Rendlesham). And it was, perhaps, the co-extensivity of barrier and contact that made the Ness a site for decades of advanced research; accessible but not too accessible; easily seeable from the harbour but not comprehensible. The pagodas resemble from a distance eccentric eighteenth-century architectural follies beamed in from a distant future. A reminder that margins are not only spatial in character but also temporal. Here and over-there is convertible into back-then and later-on.

All this might appear tangential, to be sure, but it touches upon any decision to coordinate one's practice in relation to Orford (Ness). For instance, is it more than mere happenstance that Jevan Watkins Jones' Landguard Point works engage another liminal space—another margin, between land and sea,

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Photo:
Ness I, photogram (unique)
Design: @consultingdesigner

The
Watch
House

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with a fort built to defend where the two meet? The locale explored by him is further down the coast, where the brackish (to use a phrase I've learnt from Hannah Stageman) waters of sea and river, Suffolk and Essex, meet? Amid exhibition space (Orford) and artworks (Landguard Point) different geographies come into contact. Perhaps, also, the act of drawing is likewise a mode and place of contact. That's certainly a speculative thought, which leads a host of equally speculative questions posed to/by Jevan: If drawing is line, limit, contour, does that entail therefore it's margin-producing? If so, is the margin less a question of the paper's edge, and not quite a question of the margins formed by the drawn lines on the paper's surface, but somehow materially "threaded" back-and-forth between edge and surface? Does this, then, differ from other

forms of visualization, especially cartography, in which lines and margins are construed from the hypothetical "God's eye view" of the landscape? Instead of the landscape margin imagined from above, can we figure the margin from ground level itself? And—not so finally—can one propose that drawing is less "margin-producing" than itself an instance of marginality, thereby dovetailing crucially with spaces such as Orford (Ness) and elsewhere.

Undoubtedly, these questions are speculative and abstract. They were posed to/by Jevan, but it's probably fairer to say that they are posed to/by his drawings and other artworks. Art, indeed, is where speculation can still happen and fresh insights generated.

Matthew Bowman,
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