



Liminal Futures
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Liminal Futures

Part I: Insistent Infrastructure

Hail,
 roaring down and across
 the slab rectangles of concrete runway;
 my twin-propeller plane is towed for repair.
 Flying to Orkney is never certain.
 I have heard tales of ghostly passengers
 haunting the departure hall of Aberdeen for days,
 waiting for winter weather to pass.

I land on Orkney in torrential sleet,
 mountain summit wind
 blazing,
 whipping my car door near off its hinges,
 then pressurising me in to
 the metal cage.

The supermarket shelves are laid waste.
 Locusts ahead of the storm have cleared two aisles.
 Not even a carrot.
 For if the boat does not sail,
 then the shelves are not filled.
 Food and fuel,
 rolling on and rolling off the ferry,
 are barometers;
 piled 'High' only by the will'o the wisp of the sea -
 that most treacherous of waters,

ridden with whirlpools:
 the Pentland collision between Atlantic and North Sea tides.

The worldly rise and fall of food and fuel is visible here.
 Petrol and carrots register their weighty resistance to transport
 in the balance of empty shelves.

'You are connected to the weather here,
 connected to the supply chain' says a local librarian.
 'There is a sense of the interconnectedness of things'.
 'Western consumerism is tempered' she says.
 There is clear green water always in sight
 between you and your wants;
 a ferry or two,
 between want and can have.

'We're at the end of the supply chain'
 says a startup director,
 renewable energy maker;
 his company reversing the bearing of supply and demand:
 north to down south,
 not south to up north.

Food and fuel,
 weather and wind,
 people and property:

Their hard-world, hard-won relations are
 labeled and marked clearly
 in the high cost of electricity,
 in every boat-carried kettle, pencil, bright summer dress;

in the slow, barely megabyte, broadband connection,

(but 'good view,' says the marketing writer,
a remote-presence working from home;
'sod the broadband' he jokes).

The infrastructure of Western world living
is laid bare and skin-close:
an insistent-touch of telecoms and transport;
the smell of energy on the wind.

(No urban sprawl to hide the passage of cable and coax,
no dense population to excuse the economic accounts,
no easy flat city to roll-over the fibre).

The National Grid cable,
an electrical lifeline under the sea,
over the hills and protected peat-moorland,
is the murmur of islanders,
the talk on the ferries.

A new cable is needed, capacity reached,
but where should it flow?

And many people speak,
have a future they see:

Tim worries for the archaeology;

Keith for the view;

Martin for the peak-oil,

and Annie for the folk -

those who live, work, and die here.

Gary points to the problem of

infrastructure centralisation;

the UK's post-war electrical system for urbanisation.

But archipelago Orkney is *de*-central

distributed,

urban-distant;

and so has the country's first

local

self-determined

power management system.

And it seems as if the future,

the one where people care for their networks,

for infrastructure,

supply and demand,

that future has come early to Orkney.

Part II: Self-Sufficiency

So this is not life in the past,

not a honeydewed-heritage,

'not Orkney in a jar of formaldehyde'

says the archaeological curator.

'Not fossilised' says the startup director

of a potential wind-turbine farm.

'We must be ancient and modern,' he continues to call.

'It's a living landscape -

we make a living here...'

...from farming and producing:

biogas, electricity,

beef, cheddar and fudge.

Producing and farming
 is a futures way of living
 (as Jo Vergunst reminds me):
 a care for the next generation of cattle, community, and crop.
 Some here cite a millennia of farming descent;
 generations of futurists,
 farming for the future,
 since the Vikings go the tales,
 part myth, part gene.
 'You belong to the land,
 and the land belongs to you' says a local archaeologist.
 Hefted
 is the word I hear,
 a people made land,
 a land made people;
 making the future
 (I don't need to say the future is heterogeneous and ontic).

'I ask you to imagine
 how you see the world in the future.'
 calls the startup director,
 farmer of wind, earth, and time;
 he speaks,
 compelling the crowd and community:
 'I believe hydrocarbons will be rare in everyday use...
 We are not the first place the government will send energy
 in energy-scarce times.'
 He speaks of a storm-force future
 when the energy boat does not run.

'It is the sea which has contributed to self-sufficiency'

says the islands council
 in its promotional brochure.
 The tempestuous seas are depths of invention,
 a storehouse of marine power,
 fish stock, and tales.
 So floating in Orkney are world-firsts in
 tidal and wave power,
 testing world feasibility
 in the wild
 waters.
 And the country's first community-owned wind turbine
 stands proud on its isle;
 joined now by others,
 more planned,
 futures too numerous to count,
 funded, owned, and contested
 by folk hereabout.

Orkney is 'Initiative at the Edge'
 (as a government fund names its remote far-reaches).
 This is life at the edge
 of Western world living,
 sharp,
 in focus,
 cutting edge;
 cutting its own way.

And it seems as if the future,
 the one where people care for their future -
 long local, practical, self-sufficient,
 that future has come early to Orkney.

Part III: Modest Innovation

But here is a tension,
 in the viscous flow of oil:
 for energy poverty,
 hardship of fuel and electrical power,
 is greater here than elsewhere in the country.
 And yet on one island,
 burning orange-strong in the wind,
 is the Flotta oil terminal flare.
 Ten percent of the UK's energy
 lands from the North Sea oil-fields
 and is taken from there.
 The smell of energy is on the wind,
 in the atoms of the earth,
 in the uranium of the stone,
 'Orkney is in every sense an energy island',
 says the renewable energy forum.
 (It's a land-made-people,
 people-made-land,
 made future).

'We aim as an island to be one hundred percent renewable
 by 2012'
 says the startup director
 of a biogas firm;
 son-in-law of the farmer and owner
 of the trial site for the fuel.
 'You know the all boardmembers'
 says potential wind farmer,

father-in-law and husband
 of the company board.
 You see it's all in the family,
 incestuous and relational;
 it's trust in the network,
 the community bond,
 says Michael Lange, ethnographer.
 A high-tech company director here names it:
 transparency,
 integrity.
 You are beholden to every word spoken.
 For there are no casual encounters,
 no conversations with strangers,
 no hiding in a city of blank-faces, blank-words.
 What is said is remembered,
 repeated,
 returned.
 So it's quick to get a decision here,
 I'm told with a smile.
 For everyone knows everyone,
 (for good and for gossip).

And what's remembered is holding the door open,
 as much as a global expertise;
 'We include lepers but exclude arrogance',
 says the local ecologist.
 For there is no need to shout.
 Quiet,
 resourceful,
 these are the terms,
 the local high-tech director repeats

(in comparison with MIT and the US west coast).

'Right, let's get on with it',
is the response to the need for new futures,
says the island council solicitor.
Farm and food waste becomes biogas, biofuel;
the smell of chip-fat on the car-carried wind.
It's a land-made-people,
people-made-land
getting on,
making the future.

Modest innovation,
that's what I sense.
Not entrepreneurship,
a term that's disliked
as too 'biggy',
too big for your boots,
too self not community centred;
(it's the next generation of cattle, community, and crop).

And it seems as if the future,
the one where people care to join hands,
get on and make something new happen,
that future has come early to Orkney.

Part IV: Mutable Futures

Hail
falls on the wet mush of March snow
and water-logged grass.
I stand in the centre,

the fulcrum of Orkney:
the Neolithic stone circles of Brodgar,
Stenness.
Sandstone mica glows soft
with spring shadows.
The grass, stone and sea
is a circular world in
green, grey, and brown;
the colour of tundra
and fast-tracking storms.

And on this horizon of five-thousand years
of building and dwelling,
is a wind turbine farm,
imagined,
un-negotiated,
un-formed,
heartfelt.
This landscape is living,
un-fossilized,
un-fixed.

In a community hall the crowd gathers
to debate,
to hear three other wind turbines speak
and be silenced.
Some speak for the peat-bog,
high on the hill.
Some speak for the ravens,
some for the national grid.
One for the skyline,

the tourists and their trade,
 One for the shadows, strobing her house.
 And all speak of their futures,
 so many conflicting.
 For the future is open
 mutating
 re-making.
 The turbines shifting,
 dissolving
 in quiet talks over farmhouse
 coffee and cake.
 These turbines are open,
 not just in material shape and design,
 but in ownership and presence;
 whole part of a land-made-people,
 a people-made-land.

And it seems as if the future
 the one where people re-make their own future,
 make it mutable, fluid,
 that future has come early to Orkney.

Part V: Early Adapters

Gary demos the tools of a mutable trade:
 a Virtual Terrain Program
 that models the moves,
 makes visible, malleable, commensurable,
 the many voices and species that speak
 (I don't need to add they are human and nonhuman):
 In viewsheds,

acoustic impact zones,
 and statutory sites:
 archaeological monuments speak,
 birds speak,
 the Orkney vole and otter speak.
 One data set speaks for the Hen Harriers,
 (from Jules watching and counting their flight).
 More data from watching speaks for the grass types,
 beneath my virtual feet.
 Another for the wind-strength,
 for the heather, houses and folk;
 for the laws of the landscape,
 the economics of business.

It's all here at the touch of slider,
 a layer and a dial for many to turn up or turn down;
 tuning in to a future,
 working to resonate with the possible.
 These are songs of the future,
 scored on cd-rom,
 voices composed into visuals,
 not for comparison but for communication.
 Songs of the future,
 scored into a virtual world,
 their data-voices open to creative interpretation;
 a world designed to be altered,
 performed differently.

This is high-tech industry at the edge
 of Western world living;
 cutting edge,

cutting its own way;
an early *adapter*,
not early adopter.

And it seems as if the future,
the one where technology is designed to be open,
personal, portable, adaptive,
that future has come early to Orkney.

Reprise

Orkney is life at the edge
of Western world living;
sharp,
hard,
demanding.

'We are a place where technologies are trialed.'
'A technological test-bed'
says a company director;
testing tele-presence,
remote-working,
renewable energies,
renewable pasts.

And it seems as if the future,
the one where innovation is at the edge,
difficult, distributed, de-centralised,
that future has come early to Orkney.