



***Sophie Lindsey***

# INTRODUCTION

Throughout my life I have always felt a strong pull between the rural and the urban. Growing up in a city meant that, in many ways, the urban was my default environment, however, like countless other white, middle class, able-bodied British citizens, the countryside was also always accessible to me. While on a daily basis I was surrounded by the infrastructure and amenities that characterise urban life, I also experienced countless day trips and family holidays to increasingly more remote parts of the UK; this followed my Mum's desire to get as far away as possible from everyone else. Since then, I have lived or worked in cities, towns and villages including Portsmouth, Brighton, Barrow-in-Furness, Huntly, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Cardiff, Abergavenny, Cowbridge, Llansteffan, Barcelona, El Bruc, Tilburg, Ghent, Halifax (Nova Scotia), and Cincinnati. The fluidity through which I move between these environments has caused me to feel comfortable in both, with my lifestyle remaining consistent regardless of my location.

Over the past year I have dedicated time to consider and question the urban/rural dichotomy that is often perceived in our collective imagination. This booklet acts as an initial articulation of these thoughts, focusing specifically on how jam, despite being widely available in the urban, communicates notions of rurality.

Note: For the majority of this project I was based in Tilburg, NL, however, some work took place in the south of England, Wales and Cincinnati, Ohio.





I BOUGHT THIS IN  
THE SUPERMARKET  
27.10.18



# RATHER THAN THE TOWN

In order to understand the urban and the rural lets begin with their definitions. While you may imagine me flicking through the pages of a dictionary, I am instead turning to my phone, and the undeniable influence of Google, to search 'urban' and 'rural'. The results are telling, particularly of the rural, which is defined as: "in, relating to, or characteristic of the countryside, rather than the town." This clarification positions it in direct comparison to the built environment; however, it is not reciprocated, as the urban is defined autonomously "in, relating to, or characteristic of a town or city." This encapsulates the fundamental paradox of these categorisations, as one is distinct, and the other is intertwined with its opposition. The distancing of the urban, from any non-urban reference point, can also be seen in the mind-set of many urban dwellers, while the city is constantly acknowledged in the rural, as a source of work and culture. The uneven relationship between the two sets them up for contradictions.

Welsh theorist Raymond Williams takes this notion further by emphasising the conflicting associations within each; describing the city as simultaneously a place of opportunity and competition, and excitement and noise; while the country evokes peace and isolation, as well as simplicity and ignorance.<sup>1</sup> This makes the initial paradox more complex, as the urban and the rural are increasingly subjective, making any attempt at a definitive definition reductive. However, if we accept we cannot escape contradictions and submit to the simplification of these environments, then the urban and the rural can exist in the binary in which they are often perceived. It then follows that humans, as the dominant life form, can be put in opposition with other living things. It is only when we start to apply patterns of human behaviour to these species that cracks start to emerge. For example, lets consider a bird's nest as an equivalent to a house. If multiple bird's nests are built and occupied within the same tree, then using the categorisation we apply to human housing, the collection of nests become a settlement; or perhaps due to the vertical nature of the tree, a tower block. If we continue with this, then a bird colony, the largest congregation of the species, can be compared to a city and described as metropolitan. While this progression is logical, it is not how bird colonies are usually perceived. Instead, they are seen as a pinnacle of the natural world. However, the same cannot be said of cities, as they are viewed as feats of human triumph that are separate from nature, rather than features of it.

This nonsensical division is part of a much wider discussion that I will side step in order to consider another technique that is utilised to convey concepts. Like definitions, images are tools that help communicate meaning. However, they are more open to interpretation and often demonstrate different associations and priorities rather than giving a realistic representation. When considering the contradictions in the urban and the rural, aesthetic notions become a key point of contention, particularly within the rural where the gap between expectations and reality is much larger. These expectations can be traced back to Landscape Painting of the 18th Century, which brought the aesthetic judgement of art onto the physical environment. This approach set a foundation that is still prevalent today and influences how we see and edit our surroundings. However, the central difference is that rather than through art, these images now come to us through advertising. In an attempt to appeal to as many people as possible, this often leads to an over simplification. Perhaps the most encompassing arena for this, which many of us navigate on a daily basis, is the supermarket. Given the inseparable connection between our food and the land, supermarkets blend the convenience of a hyper urban society with our associations of farming and country life, making them the perfect confluence between both environments, and an appropriate site to continue to investigate their contradictions.

<sup>1</sup> Williams, R. (2016) *The Country and the City*. London, UK: Vintage



# JAM-SCAPE

In the essay *Smells like Rural Idyll*, Rosemary Shirley states that, 'The circulation of these mythical images of the countryside situates the rural firmly within the realm of consumerism.'<sup>1</sup> While we entertain this imagined depiction through the television we watch and the raincoats that we buy, this relationship becomes more personal when it comes to the food that we eat.

As agriculture has become less visible within the urban, food has become increasingly commercialised, with supermarkets widening the gap between what we consume and where it is produced. In this context the rural is articulated through phrases such as 'freshly picked' or 'locally grown', making it a strategy for quality assurance. These associations also contribute to the construction of identity, as notions of the local blend with national pride. This is something I witness every time I walk into my local Morrison's, where the prevalence of the Union Jack, on products from potatoes to strawberries, dominate my view. Having recently relocated back to the UK from the Netherlands, where I was following the drawn out turmoil of Brexit negotiations from a distance, I find these articulations of Britishness unsettling. However, they contribute to the romanticised image of our rural past, which is integrated into our daily shopping habits. While there are many aspects of the supermarket I could explore further, I have focused on a specific product that has been particularly prominent within my thinking.

Jam struck me as something that, like the supermarket, is able to embody elements of urban life whilst being deeply rooted in notions of rurality. I began to consider this shortly after moving to Tilburg, when I encountered a small display of homemade preserves for sale in the window of somebody's home. Having consciously moved to a city from rural Scotland, this display of cottage domesticity, complete with decorative handwritten labels, jarred with my expectations. It triggered me to consider whether jam was something that could disentangle itself from these associations, to become a solely urban product. With this in mind I set off to examine the jam selection at my local Albert Heijn. Here, I was faced with products that had been made on an industrial scale in automated factories, and distributed to shelves identical to the one in front of me. Despite being far away from the foraged foraged berries and sticky kitchen that comes with making your own jam, looking at these processed products conjured up similar associations of country life.

Packaged with labels that utilised twee aesthetics, such as floral patterns, gingham printed lids and fonts in handwritten styles, the homely quality of these products were undeniable. This is most evident in the brand Bonne Mamon, as the French preserve literally translates to 'Grandma', making the nostalgic image of a family farmhouse kitchen explicit in our imagination. However, what I was experiencing with these jam jars wasn't anything new. Notions of rurality have been conveyed in countless aspects of popular culture, from nature writing to BBC documentaries and Landscape Painting. When these different articulations converge, mythical images of the countryside become more potent, leading me to consider the intersection that takes place between jam and art.

By adopting rural practices, rather than simply depicting them, many artists have chosen to embody elements of rural life, creating a more active, and often functional, relationship to the countryside. The Scottish based duo Rhynie Woman utilise foraging and cooking in order to connect the community, landscape and local history surrounding the village Rhynie, through events and celebrations. However, this approach is not unique to a rural setting, as the LA collective Fallen Fruit demonstrate in their public jam sessions, which bring people and jam together in order to 'reimagine the city as a fruitful space.'<sup>2</sup> These practices encourage interactions and relationships, combining notions of aesthetics with social experiences. This shows the desire to foster close-knit communities, an aspiration influenced by the perception of country life, where everyone knows everyone.

As a product in our daily lives, and as a material utilised by artists, jam is a powerful tool for disseminating our understanding of the countryside. However, it has been abstracted from the physical environment, instead relying on our associations to construct a mythical image of the rural. In contrast, landscape as a term describes the physical features of the land, without taking our perceptions into account. This suggests we need an alternative term to define how the rural is created within our collective imagination. I propose that this could be the jam-scape, and that instead of travelling to the countryside, to walk up a hill, notions of the country life can be activated by simply going to your kitchen to make a jam sandwich.

<sup>1</sup> Shirley, R. (2017) *Creating the Countryside: The Rural Idyll Past and Present*, London, UK: Paul Holberton Publishing

<sup>2</sup> Fallen Fruit: Homepage: [fallenfruit.org/](http://fallenfruit.org/)





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*Image List: Supermarket Jam, 2018; Jam or Coke, 2019; and  
Al Plein Fresco Air, video still, 2019*

