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Queer Horizons: Coastal Spaces as Sites for Artistic and Cultural Leadership

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Queer Horizons:

Coastal Spaces as Sites for

Artistic and Cultural Leadership

Dated: Feb 2024.

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Executive Summary: Queer Horizons - Coastal Spaces as Sites for Artistic and Cultural Leadership

Author: Garth Gratrix, Contemporary Artist, Independent Curator, Artistic Director, Abingdon Studios, Blackpool.

Date: 25 February 2025

This research explores the intersection of contemporary queer artistic practice, cultural leadership, and the UK's coastal landscape. By examining the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ artists and the socio-economic realities of coastal communities, it advocates for the strategic development of infrastructure to support queer artists as cultural leaders. The research highlights the necessity of investment in coastal queer artistic spaces, examining both historical context and present-day challenges while outlining key findings and actions to promote sustainability and inclusivity.

Key Findings:

Coastal Spaces as Liminal and Queer Zones

- The UK coastline has historically served as a site of refuge and reinvention, particularly for LGBTQIA+ communities and working-class creatives.
- Coastal towns have strong queer cultural histories yet remain significantly underfunded and under-theorised within national arts policy.
- The notion of "queer liminality" aligns with the coast's transitional and fluid nature, offering spaces for experimentation, resistance, and alternative artistic practices.

Challenges in Arts Funding and Policy

- The UK's cultural funding is predominantly London-centric, with only 16% of arts funding reaching coastal and rural areas.
- Current funding models prioritise economic impact over artistic and social value, marginalising queer and working-class artists.
- Existing policy frameworks do not adequately address the intersectionality of queerness, regionality, and class within the arts.

Queer Artistic Practice and Institutional Barriers

- Many queer artists repurpose underutilised spaces to create new infrastructures for cultural production.
- Mainstream arts institutions often engage in tokenistic representation of queer artists rather than integrating them meaningfully into broader discourse.
- There is a need for queer-led governance models that empower artists to influence funding decisions and policy developments.

Successful Coastal Arts Initiatives

- Abingdon Studios (Blackpool), WINK WINK, and We're Still Here! are leading examples of successful investment in queer artistic infrastructure, demonstrating cultural resilience and innovation. As are Marlborough Productions (Brighton),
- Marlborough Productions (Brighton) serves as a model for sustainable queer cultural leadership, leveraging funding and heritage investment to support LGBTQIA+ artists.

  These initiatives highlight the transformative potential of embedding queer perspectives in place-based cultural strategies.

Actions and Recommendations

1. **Establish a Queer Coastal Institute**
    a. A dedicated Queer Coastal Institute ethos, to serve as a hub for research, artist residencies, and queer-led cultural regeneration, providing long-term strategic leadership for queer coastal arts. Building nuanced sector resilience and success stories.

2. **Create a Dedicated Funding Stream for Coastal Queer Artists**
    a. Develop targeted funding that ensures sustainable support beyond short-term projects.
    b. Increase access to public and private arts investment in coastal regions.

3. **Implement Artist-Led Governance Models**
    a. Establish 'artist-in-residence' advisory roles within arts funding bodies to ensure meaningful queer representation and critical friendships and alliances.
    b. Encourage funding institutions to adopt governance models that empower artists to shape decision-making processes through healthy co-design commissioning and R&D relationships for people, practice, not just profit.

4. **Strengthen Coastal-Metro Collaborations**
    a. Increase the visibility of coastal queer artists through partnerships with metropolitan galleries, museums, and arts organisations.
    b. Develop exchange programs that connect coastal practitioners with urban institutions, fostering knowledge-sharing and career development.

5. **Expand Affordable Artist Studios and Exhibition Spaces**
    a. Invest in affordable, long-term artist studio provision in coastal towns to prevent displacement due to rising rents and gentrification.
    b. Strengthen commercial gallery pipelines and residency programs to increase market access for coastal queer artists.

6. **Using "Queer" instead of "LGBTQIA+".**
    a. Reflecting a commitment to inclusivity, fluidity, and critical engagement. It acknowledges that artistic and practitioner identities are not fixed check-box categories but dynamic, evolving, and embedded in cultural resistance and creative expression.

Quotes from Contributors

"Building a creative career shouldn't feel traumatic, It should be part of a wider shift in equity, inclusion, and care—especially in coastal towns, where we still have so much potential to create something new."

- SHARP, Artist (Newlyn)

"Queer rage is a useful way to reframe and reclaim our stance. We refuse to not seek out and sustain joy in equal measure."

-Kris Canavan, Performance Artist (Blackpool)

Strategic Investment: The Need for Coastal Cultural Infrastructure

Arts Council England (ACE) reports only 16% of arts funding reaches coastal and rural areas, necessitating urgent intervention.

Coastal North Collective (CNC) action research findings highlight the lack of investment and local government engagement in supporting independent queer-led arts organisations.

Case studies of Margate, Hastings, and Folkestone demonstrate the economic benefits of strategic cultural investment in coastal regeneration.

Creative Health and Wellbeing on the Coast

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGW) found that engagement in the arts reduces stress and anxiety and can lower GP consultations by 37%.

Establishing a Queer Coastal Institute could address mental health and wellbeing needs by integrating artistic practice into healthcare frameworks. A good example of this being Hospital Rooms (Penzanze and national).

Coastal towns, with their histories of refuge and transformation, hold the potential to become leading centres for queer-led creative health initiatives with best practice methodologies for artist commissioning being adopted for shared learning between health and culture sectors.

Commercial Contemporary Art Galleries and Coastal Pipelines

Only 10% of commercial contemporary art galleries operate outside of major urban centres, limiting career progression for coastal artists.
Strengthening commercial gallery networks and developing hybrid commercial/non-commercial spaces would increase visibility and economic opportunities for queer artists in peripheral regions.

Conclusion

The UK coastline is not a periphery but a horizon of possibility for queer artistic and cultural leadership. By embedding queer perspectives in funding strategies and policy frameworks, coastal spaces can be redefined as sites of ambition, care, and resilience.

This research calls for immediate action to create sustainable support systems that ensure queer artists thrive, not just survive. The future of the arts sector is on the horizon—and it is unapologetically queer.

Call to Action

- Establish a *Queer Coastal Institute* to lead coastal cultural regeneration and equitable artist support.
- Develop a dedicated funding stream for coastal queer artists and creative spaces.
- Adopt artist-led governance models in funding bodies and policy decisions.
- Strengthen metro-coastal collaborations to enhance visibility and market access.
- Expand affordable studio spaces to support long-term artistic sustainability and creative experimentation.

As bell hooks reminds us, *"The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it's to imagine what is possible."*

This research envisions a coastal arts sector that is bold, inclusive, and artist-led—one that celebrates queerness as a force for cultural transformation.

- End of Executive Summary -

Queer Horizons: Coastal Spaces as Sites for Artistic and Cultural Leadership

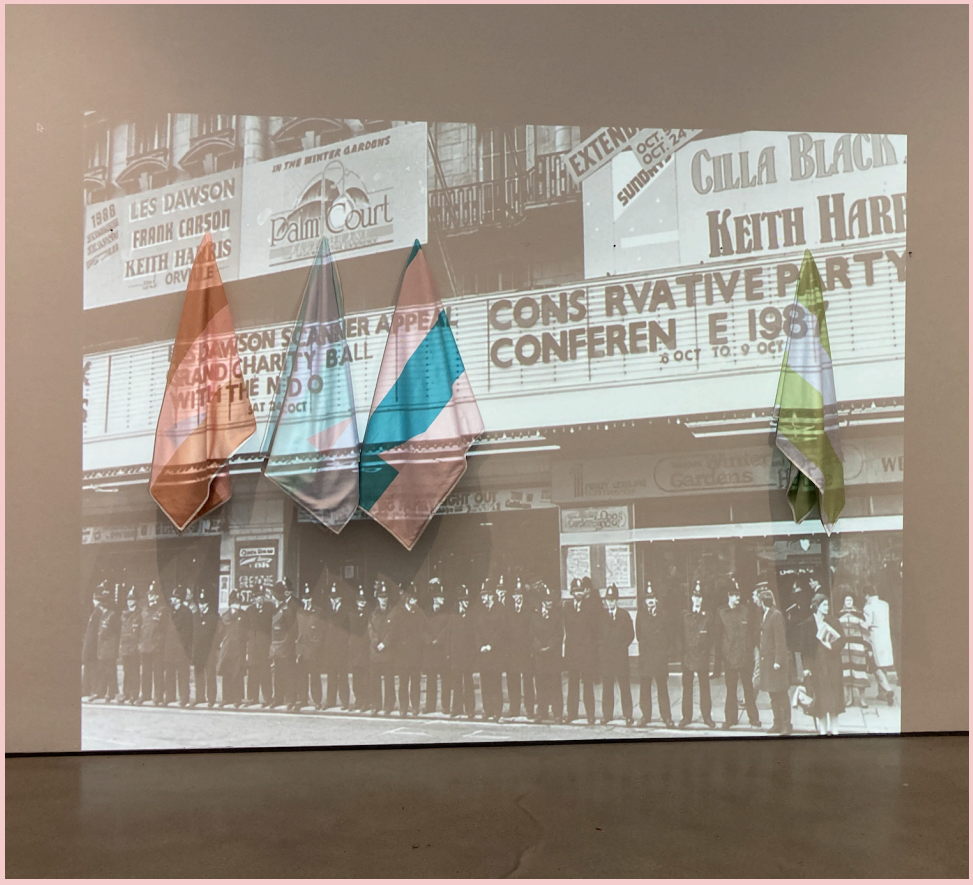
Author: Garth Gratrix, contemporary artist, independent curator, Artistic Director, Abingdon Studios, Blackpool, Lancashire, UK.

Dated 25 February 2025.

Abstract

This research explores the intersection of contemporary queer artistic practice, cultural leadership, and the UK's coastal landscape. By examining the lived experiences of queer artists and the socio-economic realities of coastal communities, this paper argues for the strategic development of infrastructure to support artists as curators and leaders. Through a synthesis of personal reflection, theoretical discourse, and policy analysis, it highlights how investment in coastal spaces can foster artistic innovation, inclusivity, and sector-wide sustainability. Ultimately, this research advocates for a reorientation of national arts strategy towards the coast, positioning it as a site of care, ambition, and future growth for emerging and established queer artists- as cultural *practitioners and place-shapers.

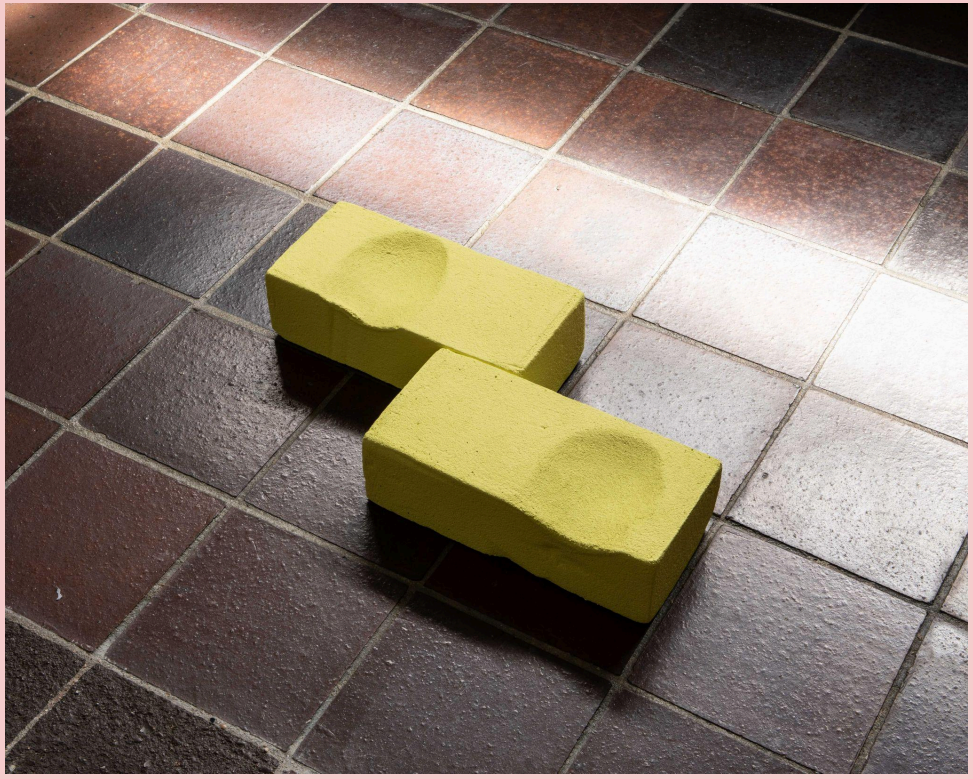
**practitioner' refers to an individual actively engaged in creative, artistic, or cultural practice. This includes, but is not limited to, artists, designers, performers, writers, musicians, curators, and other professionals working within the arts and creative industries sectors as two related, but distinct, concepts. I will be referring to practitioners, as artists throughout this research.*



Garth Gratrix, *Blackpool 1987 to Eastbourne Now* (2023). Artist in residence, Towner Gallery. Archival image of Maggie Thatcher's Conservative Party Conference held in Blackpool projected over custom beach towels.

"Art is not a luxury. Art is a basic social need to which everyone has a right."

-Jeanette Winterson, Novelist and Poet.



Garth Gratrix, *Pursuit of Happiness* (2021). Oasis, emulsion. DODO Gallery, Phoenix Studios, Brighton.

Introduction

The UK coastline has long been a place of transition and flux—a liminal space where land meets sea, stability meets movement, and tradition meets reinvention. Historically, the coast has been a site of retreat, leisure, and, at times, marginalisation. For queer artists, this edge-space provides both a compelling metaphor and a lived reality: a place simultaneously at the periphery and at the forefront of cultural reimagining.

As a queer artist based on the coast, my practice explores materiality, minimalism, and the queering of space. My work explores assumed rigidity, the formal and the frolic. Often manifesting through sculptural installations and cross-disciplinary collaborations that enliven and complicate one way of thinking, making or being. As much as I am Queer, my work imbues personal and abstract narratives; meaning there is a duality between the sacred and profane. This aesthetic and conceptual approach reflects the broader tension between cultural structures and queer identities. Just as a straight line can be softened, twisted, or made to lean, so too can the structures of artistic leadership and resource distribution be reoriented to better serve those on the margins.

There is something inherently queer about the British coast. It is a place of edges and margins, a liminal zone where the land gives way to the unknown, much like the fluidity of queerness itself. The sea has long been a site of escape, of reinvention, of exile and return—offering, as Derek Jarman once put it, the "prospect of the infinite."[1] It is no accident that coastal towns have historically been home to artists, working-class creatives, and LGBTQ+ communities alike. From Brighton's Regency-era libertines to Blackpool's drag cabaret scene, these spaces have offered alternative modes of cultural production and belonging, often in defiance of metropolitan elitism and policy neglect. Yet, despite their cultural significance, the infrastructures supporting working-class, queer artists in these regions remain woefully underfunded and under-theorised. This paper interrogates how queer coastal arts practices disrupt the London-centric, neoliberal arts funding model, carving out new infrastructures of working-class creativity that refuse assimilation while demanding recognition.

Queer and working-class artists have historically developed their own strategies for survival—from DIY club nights to community-run galleries and grassroots performance spaces. Queer-feminist theorist, Sara Ahmed, reminds us that "queer use" of space often involves repurposing and reimagining what is available, turning the inhospitable into the inhabitable.[2] Whether it's repurposing a disused pier, an abandoned bingo hall, or the back room of a fading seaside pub, these acts of reclamation challenge the normative structures of cultural value.

However, the precarity of these infrastructures is no accident. In her critique of the arts funding system, Eleonora Belfiore argues that "cultural policy in the UK remains trapped in an instrumentalist framework that privileges economic impact over artistic and social value."[3] This is evident in coastal towns, where creative funding tends to privilege tourist-friendly spectacle over grassroots cultural labour. Yet, as Jack Halberstam argues, queer art has always thrived in the "unofficial, the alternative, the unregulated."[4] It is in these liminal zones that we find new possibilities for resistance and reinvention.

By centering the voices of queer and working-class artists working in coastal regions, this paper challenges the dominant narratives of creative success, which too often assume urban privilege and institutional backing. Instead, it celebrates the messy, defiant, and deeply necessary infrastructures that emerge from the margins. Because, as any good seaside drag queen will tell you, the best performances don't happen on the main stage—they happen in the back alleys, in the caravan parks, and on the sticky floors of the local social club. And they deserve more than just loose change in the funding bucket. Notably both *Queer Amusements* Festival, and *Shhh* Cabaret clubnights in Blackpool[5].

To strengthen this argument, this paper will present statistics and findings related to the visual arts sector, demonstrating the urgent need for increased investment in queer, working-class artistic infrastructures in coastal regions.

Jenkin van Zyl, *I Only Have Eyes For You (2021)*, resin, spotlight.
Exhibited in *WINK WINK* 2023, Whitaker Museum, Lancashire. UK.
Curated by Garth Gratrix

Queering: Materiality, Form, and Lived Experience

Queerness, in my practice, is not only a subject but a method. It is the act of making—a bending of material and meaning on a self determined tightrope where back and forth journeys between the 'formal' and that of 'frolic' occur. As José Esteban Muñoz articulates in Cruising Utopia, *queerness is always a horizon, a future possibility that destabilises normative structures.*[6] My work extends this notion by rethinking spatial and formal conventions, queering not only material but also collaborating and critiquing the institutional structures in which it operates.

(left) Ro Robertson, *Hot granite on bare back (2023),* gouache, pastel, graphite and oil on paper. (right) Lothar Gotz, *Disco Series (2021),* acrylic on canvas. *WINK WINK (2023).* Curated by Garth Gratrix

I consider my work as engaged in a dialogue with minimalist traditions while simultaneously charging them with a slight shift in purpose or moment of humorous confusion. Just as Anthea Hamilton recontextualises found objects and imbues them with gendered and sexual tension, my work queers the rigidity of sculpture and the existentialism of the world we live in as both hard and soft, sacred and profane. Similarly, my approach echoes David Getsy's analysis in *Queer Formalism*, where the very act of making becomes a site of resistance and 'worlding differently'.[7]

I realised, following a conversation with Getsy, that my work deals with "iconographic anchors of queer identity." Anchoring in this instance ran a risk of suggesting too fixed, or in stasis and derivation—perhaps too stable for queering—but I see this as the dichotomy of living by the sea, for the sea, and in support of the sea. As Jarman states, "Know that sexuality is as wide as the sea,"[9] therefore, the anchors I set for my own aesthetic buoyancy are markers to build upon, or a space that is held with familiarity while also incorporating codification and obfuscation for the viewer.

In 2023, I curated *WINK WINK*, the largest showcase of living Queer artists in the north of England[8], in collaboration with Whitaker Museum & Art Gallery, Brian Mercer, National Lottery Heritage, and Arts Council England. Artists included Sunil Gupta, Helen Cammock, Ro Robertson, Jenkin van Zyl, Harold Offeh, Rene Matic, Topher Campbell, Lothar Gotz, SHARP, Jacob Talkowski, Stuart Semple, Jonathan Baldock, Rafal Zajko, Ally Rosenberg, Daniel Fountain, Sarah-Joy Ford, Trackie McLeod, Will Hughes, Jacob Talkowski, Parham Ghalamdar, Chester Tenneson. Many of these artists originate from and draw inspiration from

the coast, from St Ives, Blackpool, Southport and Great Yarmouth; imbuing its transformative properties into their work.

Trackie McLeod, *Did This Artwork Just Cure Homophobia?* (2022), Celtic Home Shirt (97-99) / Rangers Home Shirt (96-97), Printed textile, cotton. WINK WINK (2023). Curated by Garth Gratrix.

Through *WINK WINK*, I witnessed how queer identity can be imbued, coded, and fluid—shifting between unapologetic self-portraiture and subtle presence. Art remains a breaker of barriers, inviting audiences to engage with queer perspectives without overt prescription. The experience revealed the institutional tensions of advocating for queer representation, requiring a balance between allyship and avoiding tokenism.

Whitaker Museum's approach demonstrated how queer artistic expression can expand institutional narratives while ensuring visibility and integrity.

Queer curator Jonathan Katz emphasizes the importance of integrating queer perspectives into all exhibitions, stating, *"What I encourage is that all exhibitions be queer...and that we think queerly at every turn."*[9] This approach challenges institutions to move beyond tokenistic gestures and authentically embrace queer narratives.

However, many galleries willing to engage external artists as curators are affiliates of or directly funded through local authorities. The role of an authority is mass appeal and systemic neutrality. When combining this neutrality with limited resources for external marketing, dynamic gallery programs can be indirectly restricted in their ability to behave or be seen as radical in their publicity of non-normative or non-ticketed activities for local and visitor economies.

My experience curating and exhibiting has heightened my awareness of the diverse realities artists navigate. Exhibitions like *Queerly Made* across Abingdon Studios, an Indoor Street Market, and Grundy Art Gallery Blackpool in 2021 exemplify this complexity; with artists such as Claye Bowler foregrounding trans identity as an artistic and archival practice. Bowler's 2024 residencies at Porthmeor Studios, St Ives, underscore how the coastal landscape serves as a site of refuge, resistance, and rest.

In conversation with south coast-based curator and academic Matt Retallick, it became apparent that curating by the coast is a delicate balance and responsibility to be both transient and enduring. Working-class artists must collaborate or, at times, learn new choreography to connect into a return to middle-class and upper-class buying and collecting cultures and pipelines. Given the growing queer marginalisation in society and psychological isolation that can come from living on the periphery, queer artists and individuals become exemplary in their agility to form supportive communities to help build resilience. However, there is a risk of cyclically self-congratulating, connecting and collaborating beyond our own horizons and towards professional opportunities as working artists.

Connectivity is important for making working-class queer artistic ambition more visible. We also must ensure our queerness is connected to broader contexts and art histories. A frustration as a queer working artist, is that your invitations can be isolated to queer only showcases, narratives and messaging. While this holds curatorial relevance and builds status for the artist in one context, it reduces their ability to be seen in more nuanced ways and within material movements and conceptual thinking.

Talking with contemporary artist, SHARP- from their studio in Newlyn, Trewaveneth; it's clear that the UK's coastal landscape is a complicated space for LGBTQIA+ artists. On the one hand, places like Lamorna have long been a haven for queer artists, like GLUCK, Moss and Colquon, but class and wealth play a big role in who gets to stay and thrive. *"Young queer people don't always have the infrastructure to really settle in these places,"* SHARP points out. *"It's hard to feel a sense of ownership over the landscape when you're homeless or living in a caravan or relying on secondary income, sometimes even sex work."*

For mid-career artists like SHARP and indeed myself, the challenge is different but just as frustrating—often being asked to facilitate community cohesion projects rather than being supported to develop ambitious new work. It necessitates the reality that 'The Artist' outside of these short term facilitatory roles also still needs to be 'The Producer', 'Fundraiser', 'Marketeer' for their own artistic forms of expression and career development. Artistic leadership skills are embedded within an unrecognised and undervalued primary job description in our society and culture. Sustaining the making of art is not considered with fair equity alongside livelihoods and cost of living. In order for artists skills to not be diverted and better rewarded as office skills with a pension attached, there is a need for nuanced employment and a sustained evidencing of the importance of freelance artistic development in the sector..

"We need the arts organisations to take risks and support local artists' creative visions, let them be artists within the gallery spaces and not facilitators working to support the organisation's LGBTQIA+ programming while shipping in artists from across the country. I do see some organisations beginning to do this and a desire to change things, programmes like Creative Kernow associates are opening up new supportive opportunities."

Affordable artist studio spaces on the coast or in proximity are lacking and could change that. Signs of growth are apparent with studios being built at Krowji in Redruth. But more affordable studios across the coast are essential.

Spaces like Fish Factory in Falmouth do embed community support into their model, but overall, Queer artists are still forced to constantly *"oversell"* themselves—their identity, their productivity—just to access funding. "We're told to prove our sustainability," they say, "but the systems that fund us don't prove their own sustainability." Moving to Penzance, SHARP found a deeper connection to their own practice—*"The vastness of the sea opens things up for me, helps me feel more like myself"*—but that openness comes with isolation. Coastal artists often find themselves spectators of city-based arts scenes, unable to afford the travel needed to build professional networks. *"I don't know the answer to all of this,"* they admit, *"but we need to rethink what sustainable infrastructure actually looks like."* More gallery spaces and studios that showcase emerging artists within their own communities, but with national partnerships to create bigger platforms for recognition could make a difference, counteracting the self-doubt that creeps in when you're working on the fringes. And affordability is key—so many coastal towns are working-class and struggling, but they're still seen as playgrounds for the privileged. *"There can also be this pigeonholing of queer artists,"* SHARP adds as a queer person you often get asked to be in the queer shows and your work doesn't get considered outside that box. There's a wider context about my work being queer is just one element.

Right now, it feels like profit is being prioritised over people, economies over ecologies. The real risk in developing new spaces is safety. *"Making yourself visible as a queer artist can be aspirational and activist,"* SHARP says, *"but it also puts a target on your back."* Without proper support, bravery can quickly turn into vulnerability, and necessary experiments can be written off as failures instead of steps towards progress.

"Building a creative career shouldn't feel traumatic," SHARP concludes. *"It should be part of a wider shift in equity, inclusion, and care—especially in coastal towns, where we still have so much potential to create something new."*

SHARP, *This is not a safe space* (2024), neon placard.

Written and compiled by Garth Gratrix 2024/25. Supported by Clore Leadership and the Arts Humanities Research Council. Supervised by Dr Daniel Fountain FHEA, Senior Lecturer in Art History and Visual Culture
Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, University of Exeter.

Why use "Queer" instead of "LGBTQIA+"?

Hosted by Exeter University and Professor Daniel Fountain during this period of research, I was privileged to engage with their cohort of PhD students. Sharing discourse I became interested in the importance of using "Queer" instead of "LGBTQIA+"; for discussions of artistic development and practitioner identity is both a theoretical and practical decision. While LGBTQIA+ is valuable for specificity, the term queer offers a broader, more inclusive framework that aligns with fluid, intersectional, and critically engaged artistic practices. Queer as an Inclusive and fluid term resists fixed identity categories, allowing for fluidity across sexualities, gender identities, and cultural expressions (Jagose, 1996)[10]. It accommodates those who do not fit neatly within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or asexual identities while also recognising those who prefer not to label themselves. Halberstam (2011)[11] argues that queer identity is not about belonging to a category but about resisting normative structures, making it a powerful term in creative and academic spaces.

The acronym LGBTQIA+ defines specific, discrete identity categories, which some practitioners feel do not capture the complexity of lived experience (Sedgwick, 1990)[12]. Queer theorists such as Butler (1990) critique essentialist identity politics, suggesting that identity is performative, constructed, and historically contingent rather than biologically or socially predetermined[13]. By using "queer," research and funding models can account for non-binary, intersectional, and evolving identities beyond rigid classification.

There is a historical and political reclamation of this previous pejorative term. Queer has been reclaimed as an empowering, radical, and deconstructive identity (Warner, 1993)[14]. The use of Queer signifies resistance to heteronormative and cisnormative structures, aligning with anti-assimilationist artistic movements.
In the arts, queer practices often challenge institutional norms, offering alternative narratives that resist commercialisation and tokenisation (Muñoz, 1999)[15].

Aligning with artistic and research practices, many artists identify with ‘Queer art’ and ‘Queer Aesthetics’ rather than a fixed LGBTQIA+ category because it allows for experimentation, resistance, and non-conforming creative expression (Love, 2007)[16]. Queer artistic practice is often transdisciplinary, blurring boundaries between performance, activism, theory, and lived experience (Ahmed, 2006)[17]. Queerness as a methodological approach in the arts can promote alternative ways of knowing, seeing, and creating, making it a more fitting term for research in this area (Stryker, 2008)[18].

This matters for artistic development investment because Queer practitioners experience systemic barriers in funding, institutional recognition, and representation (Phelan, 1993)[19]. Funding frameworks that rely on LGBTQIA+ categories may fail to capture non-binary, intersectional, and experimental queer identities and practices when measuring what are deemed as protected characteristics or niche subject matters. A queer-inclusive funding model acknowledges fluidity, intersectionality, and cultural resistance, ensuring a more representative and equitable investment in the arts (Duggan, 2002)[20].

The Coast as a Queer Cultural Space

The coastal landscape has long served as a site of queer refuge, resistance, and reinvention. From Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, now maintained and programmed through Creative Folkestone; to David Hoyle's radical queer performance roots in Blackpool, the coast has been a place where alternative narratives can be written. However, despite its cultural potential, the coast remains economically and infrastructurally neglected, with working-class and queer artists facing significant barriers to sustainability.

A key aspect of this research is the role of queer artists in reshaping the identity of coastal towns. Just as Margate has seen artist-led regeneration through Turner Contemporary, Quench, RESORT Studios, and Carl Freedman Gallery, there is potential for similar investment in other coastal communities.

Such investment can forge better career pathways for artists, increase their visibility, and strengthen their long-term relationships with place and community. However, this requires not only financial support but also a radical rethinking of how queer and working-class artists are positioned within cultural policy.

Scholars such as Ahmed discussed the role of queer disorientation in space, positioning the coast as both a site of movement and a site of recalibration.[21] In my collaboration with Brighton-based artist, James William Murray, we published an in-conversation with Amie Corry (writer, editor, and Chair of Hospital Rooms), coining 'Queer Verticality'—where and in what ways *"language and content is transmitted, in some cases coded"* to have a creative stance or repositioning in the world. Queerness often has to question and code-switch its functionality in environments that often seek to exclude it. The shifting boundary of the coast—its horizon—is an apt metaphor for the aspirational yet unstable nature of queer creative communities outside of metropolitan centres.

In 2021, through A-N funding and Assembly programme, I was commissioned to create *The Coast is Queer*[22], bringing together artists, venue leaders, and cultural practitioners to debate the realities of making and sustaining Queer art practices along the UK coastline. 30 paid contributors and 15 paid Pecha-Kucha style artist presentations reached a digital audience (during COVID-19 lockdown restrictions). It informed the necessity of sustained networks beyond the digital (insert irony here). Sharing a need for connections to be built on emotional depth, collective advocacy, and long-term vision, rather than the efficiency-driven structures of board meetings and quarterly reporting. The strain on resources and the limitations of institutional capacities were noted as obstacles to fully embracing the coast as a site for artistic renewal. Yet, a common belief emerged: queer lives and perspectives are deeply intertwined with the emotional and professional psyche of the arts sector. In this moment of collective reassessment, why default to the language of 'new normal' when 'queer' or 'queered' could be the more radical, generative foundation for future caregiving and sector-wide visioning? Proceeding the conference, artists feedback showed increased knowledge of the realities faced nationally, as well as newfound will to continue to be resilient and commit to a practice in the arts where they live; as well as seeing newly developed festivals such as *The Coast is Queer Literature festival*, Brighton.

I argue that the role of the artist in society is inherently queer. Despite visual arts contributing over £10 billion to the UK economy, there remains no formalised, salaried roles for 'The Artist' within organisational structures.[23] The portfolio career is often framed as an inherent benefit of artistic work, yet it is used against artists—particularly those from queer and working-class backgrounds—as a justification for unpaid labour. "It's good for your portfolio" is no longer an acceptable trade-off when it ensures that those with less financial security are systematically excluded from career progression. I have always prided myself on featuring only paid opportunities in my CV. Now, as I enter my fourties, remaining based in Blackpool and working predominantly in the North, I feel an increasing anxiety about the precarity of mid-career artistic value. The shift toward in-kind offers and self-funded projects is indicative of a system that continues to exploit the labour of those who sustain it.

In response to this systemic neglect, Abingdon Studios established Blackpool's first queer heritage project in 2022. *We're Still Here!* was preceded by *The Coast is Queer* digital conference in 2021 and, earlier, *We're Here!* in 2013—a curated exhibition alongside Blackpool Pride, featuring work by Harry Clayton-Wright, Jez Dolan, and Paul Harfleet's *Pansy Project*. *We're Still Here!* was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and included an inaugural exhibition of Stuart Linden Rhodes' photographic work/s documenting 1990's queer nightlife across Britain[24]. Continuing a relationship with Linden Rhodes leading to a first time acquisition of his work through Manchester Art Fund and permanently sited in Manchester Art Gallery's collection.

The project also launched a community survey to assess future collection and acquisition aspirations and provided oral history training to preserve lived queer experiences in Blackpool. This initiative marks a significant step towards positioning the coast as a destination for queer heritage, community-led archiving, and activism.

Stuart Linden Rhodes, *Blackpool Lucy's Bar* (1991). We're Still Here (2022), Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool. UK.

Abingdon Studios continues to be a primary distributor of artist bursaries (x30 over 5 years), artist-in-residence (x 9 over 6 years) and solo and group art commissioning that has supported over 100 artist showcases in the last 10 years. In its tenth year,

Abingdon Studios now features within Blackpool's Action Plans for a new Arts & Cultural Strategy, as well as Local Authority Action Plans for a new Queer quarter and 'Be You' campaign. Ensuring independent queer artistic voices are paid to be involved in place-based strategic decision-making, board, and steering group leadership roles. However, as much as we evidence positive impact and economic investment into Blackpool's town centre ambitions for cultural regeneration; our premises remain inaccessible and with precarious local authority lease agreements and cross-departmental communication that risk destabilising our efforts to show a nuanced solution for sustaining critical mass and culture on the highstreet aligned with such local strategies whilst we are funded of national relevance through Arts Council England's Project Grant programme..

Blackpool based performance artist, Kris Canavan (also known as KrIstina BUMBOI) moved to the town following the need to provide palliative care for family. Irish born and Birmingham based prior to the move, they contributed to *We're Still Here!* oral histories, leading to a subsequent solo commission through Abingdon Studios curated programme. Their work is internationally regarded within fetish and kink subcultures and their first solo exhibition in Blackpool, *'In The Shadow Of'* featured loaned works from a perceived godfather of performance art, Stuart Brisley with their performance archive work, *Arbreit Macht Frei* (1972).

Canavan shared their perspective on Blackpool leading to *"Queer rage"* after experiencing a violent assault.

"I live for the moments to be Queer and fabulous as f#!"*, but in having experiences that seek to impact safety and freedom of expression, they went on to suggest that *"Queer rage is a useful way to reframe and reclaim our stance and refusal to not seek out and sustain joy in equal measure"*.
In the current climate, queer communities and investment into these cultures of care are urgent. Establishing a counter-defense to the growth of right-wing peripheral perspectives that often begin their campaigning in working-class coastal towns.

Diversifying the stories that can be told by the sea, broadens the way we consider our horizon as reflective of all lived experiences and with reduced geographical division. Investing in a unified community of people, projects and subcultures that assume positive intent. .

Kris Canavan, *Urolagnia* (2017), installed as part of *In The Shadow Of* (2024), Abingdon Studios, Blackpool.

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In Blackpool's closest 'rival' for the UK's leading resort, Brighton-based charity Marlborough Productions exemplifies the potential of sustained queer cultural infrastructure and growth of community cohesion on the coast. Awarded Arts Council England NPO status and over £1 million from Heritage Lottery Fund in 2023, it has launched *Queer Heritage South*, a heritage learning project celebrating and promoting the rich cultural life of LGBTQ+ communities in Brighton & Hove and now across the South coast and new support to Blackpool as a northern allie .[25]

This intersection of heritage and contemporary cultural funding makes a strong case for the necessity of a developing pipeline—one that ensures community members actively contribute to shaping both history and contemporary cultural life as future heritage and artistic movements. The growth of charities such as Marlborough provides a crucial model for advocacy and national campaigning for the needs of queer communities and artists. Meanwhile, Abingdon Studios' We're Still Here! project serves as a vital northern counterpart, offering a regional thread to an otherwise southern-dominated landscape. This research seeks to strengthen such connectivity, ensuring that artists can forge sustainable careers by the coast, not in spite of it.

In dialogue with Exeter University PhD students there was a focus on resolving how we advocate for Queer material across the coastal landscape, as opposed to isolating our experiences within North/South divisive language. *"Queer poverty exists beyond geographical perceptions of deprivation or plentitude"* (Anonymous, 2024). Suggesting we should look at our coastline as a circle that binds us all more holistically and acknowledge that there are complexities and realities associated with queer people's experiences; simply trying to tie this up in a 'divide' narrative is unhelpful, and unproductive.

Strategic Investment: The Need for Coastal Cultural Infrastructure

The UK's arts funding model has historically prioritised metropolitan centres, particularly London, at the expense of coastal and rural regions. Despite coastal towns being rich in cultural heritage, artistic communities in these areas remain structurally underfunded. In 2020, Arts Council England (ACE) reported that only 16% of arts funding reached coastal and rural areas.[26] This financial imbalance exacerbates issues of sustainability for artists, who are often forced to relocate to urban centres to access opportunities, thus perpetuating regional inequalities.

In 2022, I participated, on behalf of Abingdon Studios, in delivering a new Action Research programme to establish a Coastal North Collective (CNC). Nine visual arts organisations led this initiative, highlighting the lack of investment and local government interest in supporting independent arts organisations. Many participants noted that local authorities, rather than acting as reciprocal partners, had become competitors for limited funding. The retention of artists and creative skill sets was also a recurring issue, with few resources available to support artists in developing long-term careers outside of major cities.[27]

If the coast is to be positioned as a capital of creativity, investment strategies must shift toward artist-led initiatives, experimental use of space, and models of asset transfer within devolution deals. A move toward supporting grassroots organisations—rather than relying solely on existing institutional structures—could create sustainable artistic ecologies capable of resisting the economic precarity many coastal regions face. As bell hooks reminds us, “The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.”[28]

For queer and coastal communities alike, investment in cultural infrastructure is not just about economic revitalisation—it is about the radical potential of imagining new ways of living, working, and thriving beyond traditional urban centres. Blackpool’s visual arts spaces Abingdon Studios (self-founded) and Grundy Art Gallery (Local Authority owned, with National Portfolio Organisation status with Arts Council England, through to joined up artist development focus, have begun to shift perceptions around the national impact visual arts can have within cultural and economic growth.

Can Blackpool host the Turner Prize?[29] A simple yet complex question, with a logical direction of travel given Hull, Liverpool and recently Towner, Eastbourne as previous hosts. However, with these two visual arts organisations in Blackpool receiving significantly lower investment through Arts Council England (Grundy £249,000 2024-2026, Abingdon Studios £76,000 2024-2026) become the loss leaders for such ambitions currently.

We risk using the language of visual arts to give creative industries new energy and cultural cache, yet how that value is reciprocated and supported in the context of the arts sector, not just creative industry economic benchmarking, is essential in establishing what towns say they want within new strategies and what stays included in markers of success.

Comprehensive policies specifically targeting the development of working-class and LGBTQIA+ artists in coastal regions remain scarce. A report by the Northern Ireland Assembly from 2016, emphasises the need for improved policies and collaboration among stakeholders to maximise the potential of arts venues in addressing social inclusion issues in working-class communities.[30]

The underrepresentation of queer and working-class artists in the UK is further exacerbated in coastal regions, where cultural investment has been historically limited. Coastal towns often face economic deprivation, which disproportionately affects marginalised communities, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. A 2022 article by Tom Sockley, a Torquay-based queer artist and writer, they highlight that in the UK's seaside towns, poverty and deprivation are prevalent, and for LGBTQ+ communities, this can have a particularly devastating impact.[31]

What are artists saying they need in their coastal locations? In 2022 through Heritage Action Zone Funding, Abingdon Studios and Aunty Social CIC, as Blackpool-based organisations jointly consulted 100 members of the artistic and creative communities in Blackpool and on the Fylde Coast. 63% stated new gallery and exhibition space/s to help them take up space authentically with their is essential, with skills development and confidence in applying as individuals for future funding grants being important next steps[32].

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In proximity to water in Middlesbrough, North East, artist Will Hughes is instigating their own evidence-based report, supported by The Auxiliary Studios, to create ‘SAWDUST’-a new fabrication space and community-led placemaking model in proximity to the Yorkshire coastline.

Creative Health and the Coast: A Necessity for Wellbeing and Community Care

The relationship between creativity, health, and place is particularly crucial in coastal areas, where socio-economic deprivation often intersects with poor mental health outcomes. Research from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPGW) found that engagement in the arts can reduce stress and anxiety, improve social cohesion, and even lower GP consultations by 37% [33]. The same report highlights that visual arts are among the most accessible art forms, yet they receive less investment[34]. Practicing visual artists are often tasked with facilitating others' creativity, especially in deprived areas where community arts programs are prevalent. While these programs offer social interaction and opportunities for experimentation, without a cultural connector to professional contexts and an understanding of the artist's role, we risk devaluing artists' careers in coastal areas by limiting them to facilitators rather than recognizing them as professionals [35]. This issue is compounded by a lack of evidence for fair pay, leading to art not being discussed as a viable career in working-class towns like Blackpool [36].

Locally, the title of 'The Artist' often lacks understanding and influence, whereas roles like 'Abingdon Studios Director' can effect change. In my essay *How Would You Like Us to Perform*, I discuss adopting both fast and slow methodologies to implement systemic and personal change, broadening our horizons to reintroduce artists as leaders [37]. A significant development in Blackpool has been advocating for individual artists and independent art-led organizations to be key voices in the town's newly developed Arts & Cultural Strategy. However, collaboration takes time, and while freelance artists contribute valuable insights to boards and funding priorities, larger organisations often rush to submit bids reactively, risking the loss of long-term impact. Forming clearer consortium visions for a place challenges traditional approaches, which are often constrained by limited application times and internalised skill sets [38].

For LGBTQ+ communities and artists, coastal towns offer both sanctuary and struggle. While the vast horizons and isolation can foster creative exploration and healing, these same factors can also contribute to exclusion, a lack of support networks, and heightened economic vulnerability [39]. Taking inspiration from the *Queer British Art Research Group,* establishing an ambition towards a *Queer Coastal Institute*—as a dedicated initiative for queer-led creative spaces, artist residencies, and leadership programs—could provide vital infrastructure of care, ensuring that queer artists are supported not only in their work but in their well-being and archiving [40].

The coast could be a 'coming out' story for our creative and cultural country, where queer identity, utopian thinking, and the arts breed new perspectives, understanding, and rest.

As David Hockney once said, [41] *The moment you can learn to deal with homosexuality in art, it's quite an exciting moment, just as in a sense when people 'come out' it's quite an exciting moment. It means they become aware of their desires, and can deal with them in a remarkably honest way."* [42]

Coastal communities, with their openness to reinvention and history of providing refuge, have the potential to foster radical queer world-making. Yet, as Isobel Waidner observes in *Class, Queers and the Avant-Garde* (2019) [43], *"As metaphors, seaside towns hold antagonisms: queer potential sits with phobia. Openness to outsiders sits with misanthropy. Dependency and the tourist industry sits with xenophobia and racism."* [44]

These contradictions underscore the need for intentional, strategic cultural investment to ensure that the coast does not just serve as a picturesque escape but as a place of genuine inclusion, artistic possibility, and social change.

The rhetoric of 'world-building' is prevalent in contemporary arts and culture, yet it risks becoming another ideological buzzword, detached from systemic change and exclusionary of working-class coastal creativity. As Jack Halberstam argues, *"We should not serve as an archive for world-building according to a feminist or queer agenda, but instead, advocate very forcefully and specifically for world-breaking, world-unbuilding, and for a dismantling of life as we know it."*[45]

If we are to move towards a utopian vision, it must be rooted not in imposed structures but in care, adaptability, and community-led action.

The arts sector, with its emphasis on empathy and vision, is uniquely positioned to lead this shift—not just by funding projects but by advocating for new models of thinking, being, and belonging. Coastal arts infrastructure is not just a cultural necessity but a social imperative. To ensure a thriving, inclusive, and sustainable artistic future, we must move beyond rhetoric and towards meaningful investment that prioritises long-term human values and care over short-term policy trends.

REST (2024), performance collaboration between Garth Gratrix & Nicola Dale. Part of Garth Gratrix, *Flamboyant Flamingos* (2024) feat. Derek Jarman and Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool. UK

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Commercial Contemporary Art Galleries and Coastal Pipelines

Despite the cultural potential of the UK's coastline, commercial contemporary art galleries remain sparse in coastal towns compared to major urban centres. A 2023 study of UK galleries found that only 10% of commercial contemporary art galleries operate outside of metropolitan areas, with an even smaller proportion dedicated to emerging and mid-career artists.[46]

For artists based on the coast, the limited gallery presence impacts visibility, sales opportunities, and market reach. However, new models of representation are emerging. Artist-led spaces, hybrid commercial/non-commercial initiatives, and digital marketplaces are expanding the reach of coastal artists, offering alternative routes to sustaining a practice without necessitating relocation.

A key development in this landscape is the evolving relationship between artists and agents. Traditional models of gallery representation often do not serve working-class or queer artists, particularly those in peripheral locations. Future agency models could involve cooperative artist networks, decentralised representation through digital platforms, and partnerships with existing metropolitan institutions to showcase coastal talent.

By strengthening pipelines between coastal artists, commercial galleries, and funding bodies, the visibility of coastal practitioners can be expanded. Initiatives such as the British Council's international programmes and regional investment in new commercial gallery models could provide crucial opportunities for coastal artists to build long-term, sustainable careers.[47]

Northern lived experiences of the coast suffer further isolation in the context of visibility and access to curators, collectors, and buyers. While intentions might not be to actively exclude, the systems and sustainability pressures galleries and museums face impact where their teams and leadership seek out emergent and mid-career talent to maintain future programs, patron, philanthropic and funder relationships. I have more success speaking with northern based curators during impromptu visits to FRIEZE and London Art Fair, than I have in inviting visits to Blackpool to engage with the work of artists in proximity to their representative venues. Perhaps a code switch is to revisit the local. An artist in London, with predominantly London exhibits is a local artist, as much as an artist outside of epicentres exhibiting in smaller towns and cities. Of course context is different, but both impact the perceptions of a portfolio career and both localise the visibility and reach of artists' work.

The Role of Artist Studios in a Seaside Renaissance

Beyond galleries, artist studios serve as vital spaces for both production and visibility within the evolving ecosystem of coastal contemporary art. In 2018, research by a-n found that 30% of artists had lost their workspaces due to rising rents or redevelopment. Studio affordability is in free fall, especially in cities like London, where space can cost upwards of £600 a month. DACS and CREATe report in 2024 show statistics seeing a further decline in affordability and also artists income.[48]

In regions historically underrepresented in the commercial art market, studios function not only as workspaces but also as hubs of artistic exchange, residency sites, and destinations for collectors, curators, and funding bodies.

A case in point is Eastbourne's *Devonshire Collective,* a network of artist-led spaces that blends studio provision with commercial gallery collaborations and public engagement initiatives. Through partnerships with institutions like Towner Eastbourne and the Arts Council's *Developing Your Creative Practice fund*, the collective has supported coastal artists in securing exhibition opportunities and market exposure beyond the town itself [49].

Similarly, in Margate, Turner Contemporary, Quench Gallery and Resort Studios act as aligned incubators and launchpads for artists navigating the intersection of commercial and institutional support, fostering connections with London-based galleries while maintaining a rooted presence in the coastal creative economy and impacted decisions to move to coastal towns and cities. These initiatives illustrate how artist studios can bridge the gap between regional isolation and broader career sustainability. However it also reinforces the idea that commercial viability and artistic credibility need to be tied to metropolitan centres to be recognised as pioneers quickly to avoid burnout.

Abingdon Studios, Blackpool became the first independent and queer-led space in the town to establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the town's leading contemporary art Gallery, Grundy Art Gallery. Merging ways of working that embed artist development alongside local and national showcases that can be developed in/out and beyond coastal towns and cities. Being connected across venues and programmes also begins to instill trust for individuals in how they can see career progression and inclusion. Blackpool's unitary authority stance can indirectly create an isolated set of principles and priorities for a place, rather than embedding development pipelines that help individual creative residents connect to relevant models and career pipelines of national quality and context.

The towns new arts and cultural strategy seeks to address some of this through a new consortium of cross-artform and cross-industry Steering Group members[50]. Investing in studio provisions in coastal towns and cities is critical in skills retention. Ensuring recent graduates have an affordable first step on the property ladder that supports their creative aspirations and early career abilities to continue to experiment and mitigate against the real risks of leaving university and having nowhere to house, store or progress practice.

Studio models are predominantly independent spaces, meanwhile spaces or lease agreements with private or council asset owners. Therefore their ambitions to embed and sustain artists in the 'locale' are restricted to temporal. Meaning artists and studio leaders, although autonomous in their spaces, are affected by systematic changes of use or repurposing for commercial ideologies. How long would you live and work in a place that could not offer some foundational level of stability and reassurance? As studio prices in landlocked cities continue to rise, is the coast ready with suitable infrastructure to invite a return of former creative residents looking to invest in both their career and wellbeing by the sea?

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Collaboration Between Artist Studios and leading Galleries: Economic, Cultural, and Queer Impact

The collaboration between artist studios and main galleries plays a crucial role in the sustainability of coastal art scenes, impacting community engagement, local economies, and tourism. Studies have shown that cultural industries contribute significantly to regional economies, with coastal arts initiatives increasingly driving regeneration and tourism. For example, research conducted in 2022 found that arts and culture-related tourism contributed £850 million annually to the UK's seaside economy, with coastal art galleries and artist-led spaces accounting for a growing proportion of this revenue.[51] Such collaborations foster artistic innovation while also enhancing public engagement. Open studio events, artist residencies, and exhibitions that integrate both local talent and external networks can create dynamic cultural destinations. A notable example is Hastings Contemporary, which regularly collaborates with local artist studios, running artist-in-residence programmes that bring international attention to the region while also strengthening local cultural participation. As a result, visitor numbers to Hastings Contemporary increased by 27% between 2019 and 2023, with a noted impact on surrounding businesses including hotels, cafés, and independent retailers[52].

Similarly, in Folkestone, the Creative Folkestone Triennial has demonstrated the power of artist studios working in collaboration with commercial and institutional art spaces. The festival's investment in local artists and partnerships with London-based galleries has helped generate over £4 million in additional tourism revenue per edition[53].

The impact on Queer artists is particularly significant in coastal areas where visibility and community support may be less pronounced than in urban centres.

Initiatives such as the Queer Coastal Art Collective in Brighton provide a critical platform for LGBTQ+ artists by partnering with major galleries and funding bodies, ensuring representation in high-profile exhibitions. A 2023 survey found that 62% of LGBTQ+ artists working outside metropolitan areas felt increased professional isolation, but collaborations between coastal studios and major galleries have begun to bridge this gap, offering mentorship, funding, and exhibition opportunities[54].

The ecological implications of such collaborations are also noteworthy. By embedding artist studios within coastal communities, the need for extensive travel to metropolitan centres is reduced, promoting more sustainable creative economies. Moreover, studios and galleries that prioritise environmentally conscious practices—such as the use of reclaimed materials and low-carbon production methods—can further position coastal art hubs as models for sustainable cultural production.

By fostering deeper partnerships between studios, galleries, and funding bodies, coastal towns can continue to transform into thriving cultural economies. These connections not only benefit individual artists but also enrich communities, strengthen local identities, and contribute to a more decentralised, equitable art world.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The UK coast is not a periphery; it is a horizon. By investing in queer-led artistic initiatives, embedding health and wellbeing within artistic leadership development, and strengthening commercial gallery networks, we can reframe coastal spaces as sites of innovation, leadership, and resilience, not just linear fiction. This research suggests a calls for:

1. A dedicated funding stream for coastal Queer artists and studios, ensuring sustained support and visibility beyond short-term project funding. Similar models can be seen in initiatives like Queer Heritage South and the Invisible Britain project, which fund community-led creative responses.
2. A long-term action research project commissioning and archiving the needs of queer coastal art and ideas, learning from Coastal Community Fund but with a Queer and visual arts remit sustaining a relevant networks and mapping future needs for the sectors understandings into intersectionality..
3. The establishment of a Queer Coastal Institute—a national strategy hub for queer-led cultural regeneration, co-commissioning, and artist representation, akin to the work of Hospital Rooms in embedding artistic practice within healthcare, but embedding queerness within a creative & cultural country strategy.
4. Increased investment into new governance models and coastal mergers, drawing on examples like Abingdon Studios in partnership with Grundy Art Gallery as receivers of increased investment in support of inclusive and diverse artist development programming..

By embracing the potential of coastal spaces, we can ensure that the next generation of queer artists and cultural leaders are not just surviving but thriving. The future of the arts sector is on the horizon—and it is undoubtedly and unapologetically queer, given the reality of leading a sector of spinning plates.

Garth Gratrix, *Flamboyant Flamingos* (2024), detail of cast bronze spinning plates. Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool. UK

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