

**EXPERIMENTAL CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE IN RURAL PLACE**

**A STUDY OF RURAL ARTIST RESIDENCIES AND COLLECTIVES**

Stacey L. Ray Roth

Presented to the  
Arts and Administration Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Science in Arts Management


June 2016

**PROJECT APPROVAL PAGE**

Student: Stacey L. Ray Roth

Title: Experimental contemporary art practice in rural place: A study of rural artist residencies and collectives

This project has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in the Arts and Administration Program by:



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Patricia Dewey Lambert, PhD  
Professor and Program Director, Arts and Administration Program  
University of Oregon

June 6, 2016

Date

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Lastly, I owe sincere appreciation to my dear husband, David Roth, without whom I could not have possibly completed this project, having withered away from starvation.

Thank you.

This project is written in dedication to my father, Shane Ray, who was unexpectedly taken from us much too soon. Living out his life in rural Montana as a butcher, farmer, gardener, logger, and mechanic, my Dad was a true maker and creative thinker, although he never defined himself as such. I cannot thank my wonderful parents enough for giving me the immeasurable gift of being raised in the country, which will always call my name and have my heart.

## **EDUCATION**

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### **Master of Science: Arts Management**

University of Oregon-Eugene, Graduation June 2016, GPA 3.95

### **Bachelor of Fine Arts: Studio Art (Painting and Drawing)**

#### **Bachelor of Arts: Art History**

Montana State University-Bozeman, Graduated May 2012, GPA 3.93

- Studied Abroad in Italy (art history and studio art) *Feb – May 2010*
- Achieved Highest Honors for both undergraduate degrees
- Awarded eleven scholarships to fund almost entire undergraduate education

## **EMPLOYMENT**

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### **Operations and Development Coordinator**

Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy, *Eugene, OR (Sept 2015 – June 2016)*

- Conducted research, support, and coordination for projects, program development, and project budgets
- Maintained management and development systems; stewarded digital resources and constituency database
- Managed content and communications including e-news, media, web and annual publications

### **Public Programs Intern**

Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, *Portland, OR (July 2015 – Sept 2015)*

- Helped plan and implement public programs including lectures, workshops, panels, discussions, and field guides
- Developed and disseminated an outreach plan for the Time Based Art (TBA) Festival
- Developed artist contracts, schedules, planning materials, web and email communications

### **Sales and Marketing Director**

Banovich Art, *Livingston, MT (Aug 2012 – Feb 2015)*

- Coordinated arrangements for art auctions, exhibitions, commissions and special projects
- Worked with artists to curate and install a 3300 sq. ft. exhibition space; coordinated artist demos
- Directed all marketing and publicity; managed extensive redesign of new website; enhanced company brand
- Worked closely with graphic designer on creation of 84-page printed catalog, marketing and collateral materials
- Managed and maintained database and records for artwork, clients, and sales
- Nurtured relationships with high-status clients; formed new business partnerships; expanded social networks
- Fostered wholesale and retail accounts; directed strategic sales planning and performance goals; led meetings
- Coordinated events; helped plan a fundraising event for partner non-profit
- Implemented a limited edition giclée program and raised over \$13,000 for lion conservation

### **ASMSU Arts and Exhibits Director**

Associated Students of Montana State University (ASMSU), *Bozeman, MT (Aug 2008 – May 2012)*

- Directed over 50 gallery exhibitions, artist lectures, workshops and displays; worked closely with artists
- Curated and installed artwork and maintained gallery space in Strand Union Building on MSU campus
- Led planning committee for large annual student art show and sale
- Directed all marketing activities; worked closely with graphic designer and also designed some materials
- Coordinated a bi-annual call to artists
- Managed Arts & Exhibits budget; regularly presented financial and program reports
- Hired and supervised 4-5 gallery employees; delegated duties and led meetings
- Developed proposal and led efforts to achieve approval for \$50,000 gallery renovation, the first in 30-year history

### **Gallery Sales Associate**

Visions West Galleries, *Bozeman and Livingston, MT (May 2010 – May 2012)*

- Assisted with gallery curation, installation, and preparation for opening receptions
- Engaged gallery visitors with contemporary art by local and regional artists; negotiated art sales
- Nurtured relationships with artists and clients; designed digital marketing materials for potential clients
- Maintained physical inventory, artwork and contact databases; managed website and digital media

### **Student Associate**

MSU Leadership Institute, *Bozeman, MT (Aug 2008 – Jan 2009)*

- Coordinated leadership events on campus, including speakers, debates, Q&A panels, leadership training
- Planned a discussion panel of the Bozeman City Commissioners on campus
- Organized and distributed marketing and public relations materials for events

### **LEADERSHIP AND VOLUNTEER SERVICE**

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**Chair** – Emerging Leaders in the Arts Network, University of Oregon (*Sept 2014 – Present*)

**Coordinator** – JSMAC Sketchbook Collective (*March 2015 – Present*)

**Assistant Sketchbook Coordinator** – World of Work Program, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (*Feb 2015 – May 2015*)

**Membership Chair** – Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art Student Advocacy Council (*Sept 2014 – May 2015*)

**Curatorial Committee Member** – Zoot Committee of the Arts (*Sept 2012 – Sept 2014*)

**Co-Founder** – Bozeman Contemporary Arts Coalition (*May 2012 – Dec 2012*)

**Member** – Montana Art Gallery Director's Association (MAGDA) (*Sept 2008 – May 2012*)

Attended annual conference each year; learned current art administration practices in Montana; presented on behalf of the ASMSU Exit Gallery and its feature artists

**President** – Upheaval: A Revolution of the Arts Committee (*Jan 2008 – May 2012*)

**Officer** – MSU Painting & Drawing Guild (*Sept 2010 – May 2011*)

**Peer Leader** – MSU Freshman Seminar Program (*Sept 2009 – 2009*)

**President** – MSU Alpha Lambda Delta Honor Society (*Sept 2008 – May 2009*)

**Mentor** – Child Advancement Program (*Sept 2007 – Dec 2007*)

### **SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS**

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- Arts & Administration First Year Graduate Research Award, University of Oregon (2015)
- ASMSU Director of the Year (2011, 2012)
- MSU Pure Gold Award (recognition for exemplary contributions to the university community)
- MSU Undergraduate Juried Art Exhibition (3 years)

### **TECHNICAL SKILLS**

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- Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign (graphic design and editing)
- Digital photography and editing (courses in photography)
- Learning video creation, animation and editing; Adobe Premiere
- WordPress, Constant Contact, website CMS, and other digital platforms; content curation
- Constituency, art inventory, and sales databases; knowledge of development software

## **ABSTRACT**

Stacey L. Ray Roth

Master of Science in Arts Management  
Arts and Administration Program, University of Oregon

June 2016

Title: Experimental contemporary art practice in rural place: a study of rural artist residencies and collectives

A perceived dissociation exists between contemporary art and rural space, and there is little supportive framework for experimental work to be developed and sustained. Rural America faces challenges fueled by major transformations of recent decades. Experimental contemporary art and socially-based practices mobilize art for critical inquiry and innovative thinking around complex contemporary issues, while connecting artists, organizations, and communities in a rural context. Artist collectives and residencies are naturally suited to provide structure and support for creative collaboration and experimentation in an isolated environment.

The purpose of this study is to better understand what characterizes the field of rural artist residencies and collectives across the United States, and how such organizations support experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context. More broadly, this research begins to investigate how experimental practice, social engagement and critical inquiry are situated within the field of rural arts and culture. An initial “field mapping” process generated an overview of rural U.S. artist residencies and collectives from which six case studies were selected for deeper analysis. Utilizing a triangulation of methods that include interviews, document and media analysis, the case studies offer illustrative examples of how such organizations support contemporary art and experimentation in a rural context through a social approach.

This research builds on existing inquiries into contemporary art in the rural. It serves to advance the emerging genre and encourage others to explore relationships between experimental contemporary art and rural space, further diminishing boundaries between presumed “urban” and “rural” art concepts and conventional ways of engaging with contemporary art.

Keywords: artist collective, artist residency, contemporary art, experimental, socially-based practice, social sculpture, rural

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A perceived dissociation exists between contemporary art and rural space. There is little supportive framework for this work to be developed and sustained, and little research exploring avant-garde contemporary art in the rural or how this might be manifested in reality. Rural America has faced major transformations in recent decades. Experimental art practices have the potential to encourage critical inquiry of complex contemporary issues, inventive solutions, and new ways of thinking, while connecting artists, organizations, and communities. There is limited formal research exploring these practices in the United States, but artists and organizations are investigating models of contemporary art practice in an international rural context.

Artist collectives and artist residencies may be naturally suited to cultivate experimental art practices in an isolated environment. Connective organizational structures such as these are commonly utilized to support networks of artists, and can provide structure for experimentation and critical inquiry, but there is little research indicating what role they have in the rural, and particularly how they might support socially-engaged, experimental practice and contemporary art. We also lack understanding as to what effect such work might have outside urban areas.

The purpose of this study is to learn what characterizes the field of artist residencies and artist collectives throughout the rural United States, and how such organizations might support

contemporary art and experimental practice in rural America. By examining how these types of organizations operate within a rural context, and what role they play, we gain a better sense of how to support experimental contemporary art in other rural areas, and whether artist collectives and residency structures should be part of this strategy. More broadly, this research begins to investigate how experimental contemporary art, socially-based practice and critical inquiry are currently situated within the field of rural arts.

This research builds on previous inquiries of contemporary art in the rural, and provides a field guide to some of the artist collectives and residencies in the rural United States that support socially-based experimental contemporary art. Hopefully this work may help to advance the emerging genre and encourage others to explore relationships between experimental contemporary art and rural place, further diminishing boundaries between presumed “urban” and “rural” art concepts and conventional ways of engaging with contemporary art.

This study investigates the following question: *What broadly characterizes the field of rural artist residencies and collectives, and how do these organizations support socially-based experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context?* In the process of answering this main question, I explore these supporting areas of inquiry: What characteristics broadly define the field of rural artist residencies and collectives in the United States? What relationship do resident or visiting artists have with the organization and the community? How do they engage rural places with contemporary art and experimental practice? What does this practice look like? How do rural context and aesthetics inform contemporary art, and how does contemporary art inform concepts of the rural?

## **Research Methodology and Design**

### Methodological paradigm

This qualitative research study employs a triangulation of methods to explore the research questions proposed above. These include case studies, interviews, and document and media analysis, which are contextualized by extensive literature review.

### Research approach and dimensions of research

The study methodology utilizes a general overview of the field of rural artist residencies and artist collectives, as well as collective case studies exploring selected organizations that support experimental contemporary art and socially-based practice. The study not only investigates the field as a whole, but concentrates on specific organizations that exemplify the focus of this study. Interviews and document and media analysis are utilized to construct the case studies. While literature review is not one of the formal research methods, it is absolutely integral to the study, serving to define the broader context of an area lacking in substantial formal research.

### Strategy of inquiry

The main strategy of inquiry within this research is from a constructivist or interpretivist perspective designed to produce new qualitative data from case studies and their corresponding interviews and document analysis. As demonstrated through a case study examination by Community + Public Arts: Detroit, the variety of methods used allows for an in-depth analysis with many layers (University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2014). These collective case studies are not comparative but instead serve to explore themes that emerge across the cases,

identifying major similarities and differences and providing a holistic study that highlights variation and commonality in approach. Because there are few rural organizations conducting this sort of work, it is valuable to explore the distinct nuances in various organizational and program models. This potentially contributes to the larger dialogue around “cultural geographies,” that explores how arts and culture work varies based on place, and especially within rural regions.

Interviews support the case studies from an ethnographic perspective, incorporating human experience to better understand the goals and strategies of each organization. The Detroit analysis provides a good example of the use of case studies, and effectively utilizing interviews to identify reoccurring themes, illustrate examples, and compare and contrast project objectives with actual impact (University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2014). Conducting interviews for each case study elaborates on data collected from document and media analysis and provides:

- Rich contextual information about the organization and place
- Deeper understanding of the organization, its objectives, programs, and projects
- Valuable insight into challenges and opportunities
- Exploration of the organization’s relationship to experimental contemporary art and socially-based practice

An analysis on the method of interview by Robert Weiss (1994) explains that interviewing gives the researcher access to the observations of others. The word “access” is key here, as interviews provide valuable internal perspectives and deeper insight into programs and projects from which the researcher is disconnected. Due to the interpretive nature of this research, interviews are utilized to understand human experience, perception and interpretation. They contribute illustrative depth to the case studies, and support holistic and multidimensional understanding of a complex topic.

## Overview of research design

A comprehensive list of rural artist residencies and collectives located within the United States served as the initial foundation of this study. Broad similarities and differences that characterize this field were explored through a “field mapping” process. As part of this process, organizations with a focus in experimental contemporary arts practice and a degree of social engagement were identified, from which six case studies were selected for more in-depth analysis. Case studies were selected based on the following criteria: located in rural United States; identifiable as either an artist collective, artist residency or similar format; focused on experimental contemporary art; and incorporating socially-based practice. The selected organizations, according to my knowledge, best exemplify the focus of this study.

Beyond the surface level field analysis, additional information collected for each case study explores the organization’s relationship to experimental contemporary art and socially-based practice, and provides in-depth analysis of organizational structure, history, purpose, and programs. Singular interviews lasting thirty to sixty minutes were conducted with organizational leadership, with one or two persons being interviewed per case study.

Case studies rely on analysis of public documents and media found in digital and print materials which include online information, press, reports, articles, books, images, video, and printed collateral. Similar to interviews, these materials give insight into relationships between the organization, artists, surrounding communities, and experimental contemporary art practice.

## Researcher bias

I recognize that my own experience growing up in a rural setting and my interest in and experience with contemporary art may provide grounds for potential bias. My perspective may

be used as personal context but will not be utilized as testimony or evidence, and will not influence my objective analysis. I care deeply about rural culture and the arts, but have worked to confront my own assumptions regarding rural culture, contemporary art, and their intersections.

I have made acquaintances with some of the individuals interviewed and referenced within this study during the Rural Arts and Culture Summit in June of 2015, and conducted a professional informational interview with one of the case study participants prior to the study.

### Delimitations

For the purposes of this study, I have set specific parameters to determine case studies, choosing those organizations that best exemplify the focus of this research. Much of the existing research on rural arts seems to come from an international context. Therefore, these case studies are limited to the United States, supplementing existing research through contextual literature review. Case studies were developed off-site, at a considerable distance with limited interaction, and with analysis of only publicly available media and documents. A limited number of case studies were conducted, with a very limited number of interviews within each case. The field analysis is broad and surface-level, relying only on information publicly available online.

### Limitations

This research is limited by the small number of case studies I am able to conduct, which excludes investigation of other organizations that could potentially provide valuable information and examples in agreement with or in addition to my findings. The study cannot capture all possible relevant strategies and program models existing in the United States. It also cannot be generalized as a set of best practices because such work is highly dependent on place, culture and

organizational mission. Therefore, by limiting investigative methods to singular interviews and document analysis, and not incorporating on-site visits, the case studies are limited in their depth of analysis. Lastly, having not measured community impact, I am only able to provide information directly from and about each organization, excluding perspectives from the connected communities, participants and audiences.

## **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

### Research population and recruitment methods

Case study organizations were selected from a compiled list of artist collectives and artist residencies, and had to fit the case criteria: 1) located in rural United States, 2) identification as an artist collective, residency or similar format, 3) exhibits a focus on experimental contemporary art, and 4) appears to value socially-based practice. Selection of cases from this list were based on those organizations that best exemplify the focus of this study. Interview participants included leadership within case study organizations, selected using purposive sampling based on their position title, responsibilities, and depth of familiarity with the organization. Selected case study sites were sent a recruitment email and consent form, and potential interviewees received an introductory recruitment email. Six organizations were chosen as case studies, and seven individuals were interviewed.

### Informed consent procedures

Case study sites received a consent form as an attachment with their recruitment email to be signed and returned prior to conducting any research. Consent material was verbally reviewed with each phone interview participant. Participants were encouraged to respond with any



questions about the research or related procedures. Please refer to Appendix D to view the case study consent form and Appendix E for the oral interview consent script, which reviews anticipated risks, confidentiality, and potential benefit to participants.

#### Data collection and disposition procedures

Stimulated by an intrinsic interest in contemporary art and rural culture, I have been collecting literature on related subjects since beginning my graduate studies which has expanded my knowledge and understanding of the rural arts field. This understanding was also informed by conversations with rural arts scholars and practitioners during my graduate studies, and through participation in the 2015 Rural Arts and Culture Summit in Morris, Minnesota. To organize and analyze information related to research themes, literature was assigned relevancy indicators, tags, and conceptual categories (rural, experimental contemporary art practice, and artist collectives/residencies).

Case study information was gathered from documents, media, and interviews according to the same themes used to analyze the collected data. Document and media analysis provide situational data found publicly online and in printed materials that support the case studies. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with one or two organizational leadership from each site, and were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy.

#### Coding and analysis procedures

Field mapping data was entered into a spreadsheet with basic information related to geographic location and population, organizational structure (residency or collective), year

established, mission, program types, role of artists, selection criteria, degree of social engagement, and association with experimental contemporary art practice.

All relevant case study information gathered through interviews, documents and media was organized into data collection sheets and coded through the following system for analysis:

HP: Related to history and purpose  
O: Related to organizational structure  
PS: Related to program strategies  
A: Related to role and expectations of artists  
SE: Related to social engagement  
E: Related to experimental art practice  
C: Related to challenges  
R: Related to rural

#### Strategies for validating findings

To validate my research findings, I employed a variety of strategies suggested by research methods expert, John Creswell, in his text *Research Design* (2014). I utilized triangulation of data sources for a layered study. I maintained referential adequacy, or a well-developed data corpus, through detailed notes and clean, well-organized data that was consistently managed. Developing a coding strategy prior to data collection and utilizing consistency throughout the process has helped ensure reliability. Transcribing, comparing interview notes to audio recordings, and inviting respondents to confirm the accuracy of their statements also has helped validate this study. The academic network at University of Oregon was utilized for peer debriefing, and a draft of the research findings was submitted to my academic research advisor for review.

### Role of the researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was that of an active listener and external information gatherer. I approached this research from a distance, without the need to be on-site, which limited my involvement. Interviews were conducted over the phone, and any other correspondence took place through email to arrange interviews and to acquire any additional documents for analysis. I collected and analyzed existing public documents, media and literature. While I have made professional acquaintances with some of the interviewees, I have not had prior experience with any of the case study organizations. My perspectives from previous engagement may be used to contextualize responses but are not incorporated as testimonial.

### Expectations

I expected to learn about experimental contemporary art in the rural, organizations that may be doing related work, and potential models for practice and social engagement. Overall I hoped to gain a better understanding of the relationships and influence between artist collectives and residencies, contemporary art, and rural place, potentially learning about the role and value of experimental contemporary art practice engaged within a rural context.

### **Benefit and Significance of this Study**

This study is situated alongside other research exploring rural arts and concepts of rural creative clusters, but with a particular focus on artist collectives and artist residencies that support experimental contemporary art in the rural United States. Much of the existing research on rural arts has been formulated outside of the U.S. This study formally investigates an emerging genre of socially-based experimental contemporary art practice that is manifesting in a

variety of ways throughout rural landscapes. It serves to better articulate and geographically situate this relatively unknown field, providing a collection of illustrative examples within the format of an artist residency or artist collective. This research may be of value to artists, practitioners, and organizations with similar interests in contemporary arts practice in a rural context. The study provides potential models of practice and social engagement, or at the very least, demonstrates examples for further analysis, expanding understanding of socially-based practice and presenting alternative models of contemporary arts production outside of urban areas. Hopefully this study will lead to further exploration of the relationships between experimental contemporary art, socially-based practice, critical inquiry and rural place.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW: THE RURAL CULTURAL CONDITION

“It is significant that the common image of the country is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future. That leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present.”

– Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*

The focus of this research is characterized by the intersection of three main areas: 1) rural arts and culture 2) socially-based practice and social engagement, and 3) experimental contemporary art. These content areas are deeply connected in this study, with artist collective structures serving as the platform from which to research contemporary art practice within a rural context. Organizing mechanisms such as artist collectives or artist residencies provide a structural framework to support experimentation and critical inquiry in a remote setting. This study explores the context and practices of such collectives and their relationship to rural community as well as to broader concepts of rural place and culture.

This research has been informed by theories related to rural arts and culture, community arts, participation and engagement, community development, and creative clusters. It is influenced by emerging theory around contemporary rural arts, experimentation, critical inquiry,

and ideas related to social sculpture and social practice. The specific theories of Handwerker and Saxton (2014) and Hunter (2014) provided the catalyst for inquiry into socially-based contemporary arts practice within a rural context. Hunter's brief essay in *A Decade of Country Hits* motivated my reconsideration of traditional art and culture concepts associated with urban and rural. Hunter is a community arts leader in England who has helped begin to redefine contemporary rural culture, aesthetics and narrative, enabling a more critical perspective of the rural, and its related policy and issues, through advocacy for socially engaged contemporary art practice (Sherman, 2015).

Research within the field of rural arts and culture establishes a framework for this study and situates a focused investigation of contemporary art and artist collective structures within this broader contextual environment. This chapter introduces the rural arts and culture context, exploring the various roles of the arts in rural cultural geographies. It also provides an overview of various conversations around contemporary rural identity and how those influence perceptions of rural arts and culture and creative practice.

### **Investigating an Emerging Genre**

Contemporary experimental art and critical creative inquiry are not readily associated with the rural because of constructed mainstream perceptions of "rural" and "urban" cultural identities. There appears to be a lack of connectivity between contemporary artists, and misunderstanding of the value and impact of contemporary art and experimental practice. There is little supportive framework for this work to be developed and sustained, and little research exploring avant-garde contemporary art in the rural or how this might be manifested in reality.

Rural America faces challenges fueled by significant transformations that have occurred in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Experimental creative practice has the potential to stimulate critical inquiry and new ways of thinking about complex contemporary issues, encourage conception of internal solutions, and create connections (Hunter, 2014). There is limited formal research exploring this in the United States, but international artists and organizations are investigating models of contemporary art practice in a rural context.

Artist collectives and residencies may be naturally suited to cultivate experimental art practice in an isolated environment. Connective organizational structures such as these are commonly utilized to support networks of artists, and can provide structure to support experimentation and critical inquiry (Drake, 2003). But there is little research indicating what role they have in the rural, and particularly how they might support socially-engaged, experimental practice and contemporary art. We also lack understanding as to what effect such work might have outside urban areas.

### **The State of Rural Arts and Culture**

It is essential to provide context around the current state of rural arts and culture, particularly in the United States, as a framework for this study. As demonstrated by the 2010 Census, “urban” defined 80.7% of the total population, and 19.3% was constituted as “rural.” The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) identifies two types of urban areas: “Urbanized Areas of 50,000 or more people; and Urban Clusters that represent areas containing at least 2,500 and less than 50,000 people. ‘Rural’ encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area” (para. 2). If we include urban clusters, the population living in rural and small towns 50,000 or less increases to 28.8%. This is a decrease from 31.7% in 2000, but still almost a third

of the overall U.S. population (United States Census Bureau, 2016). The rural contains 75% of the nation's land, and is integral to the U.S. economy, serving as the foundation for much of the country's food and resource needs, and is also "a wellspring for much of the country's history, culture, recreation and tourism activities" (Bayard, 2005, p. 2).

Between 85-90 percent of food consumed in the United States is produced domestically despite only about 2 percent of Americans identifying as farmers (Pew Charitable Trust, 2010). Rural Americans produce the vast majority of our country's food and energy, yet our rural communities are de-stabilizing (Barrett, 2013, p. 23).

The rural is alive and well. It maintains significant economic and cultural presence in the United States, yet according to the 2008 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, just 12% of non-profit arts organizations are located outside of urban centers with a population of 50,000 or more (Iyengar, 2010).

### **Cultural and Economic Transformation**

Rural America has experienced dramatic transformations in culture and economy during the last century, through the transition from resource-based economies dependent on agriculture, mining, and forestry, to modern industrial and knowledge-based economies:

Agricultural production on the small family farm dwindled following the 1980's Farm Financial Crisis. Now manufacturing, which was once hailed as the economic savior for rural communities, is at risk as production centers ship overseas. In response to the steady loss of economic opportunity, natural population growth has declined in many rural areas resulting from twentieth-century urban migration (Barrett, 2013, p. 23).

The realities of contemporary rural America do not correspond with the imaginative rural idyll, nor does the small family farm hold the same stature in today's reality as it does in the public mind. In general, the rural is older, and growing at a much slower rate than its urban counterpart, in some cases losing population (Bayard, 2005). "In 2012, the poverty rate in rural



areas was 3% higher than that of cities, with 571 of the 703 high-poverty U.S. counties located in rural America” (Fluharty, 2015, para. 12).

Rural culture is no longer as distinctly separate from its urban neighbor. Diversity in rural communities is increasing at higher rate than in urban areas, “with people of color stimulating 83% of the population growth and now comprising 21% of these communities” (Fluharty, 2015, para. 12). A great number of small communities are situated in close proximity to metro areas, which increases the number of people, and especially creative workers, who migrate to cities for work and cultural activities:

Today, rural artists are making work in a period where the particular American pastoral vision of white, God-fearing farm families no longer holds. In our post-agricultural moment, only 19% of rural people actually live on farms, and 90% of their income is generated *off* the farm – meaning that many spouses are supporting such operations by working in nearby cities and industries. ... We know from recent data that half of rural America is located in metropolitan counties, just as we have known for decades that tens of thousands of artists, writers, and critics raised in the country come to cities each year for education and employment (Fluharty, 2015, para. 12).

An increasing number of creatives are choosing to live and work beyond cities, partially due to an increasingly digital world that allows isolated artists the ability to easily develop broader professional and ideological networks. But digital is limited in many ways, especially in its capacity to bring people together and to influence place (Fluharty, 2015). Therefore, this study explores tangible organizing structures such as residencies and collectives that support environments for connectivity, collaboration, and explorative art-making in rural context.

For those artists who do choose to reside in rural areas, remoteness, infrastructure deficiencies, separation from cultural centers, and lack of population are challenges repeatedly emphasized throughout much of the existing literature on rural arts and culture. A case study on Darwin, Australia calls attention to distance from key centers, emphasizing the struggle for

artists to keep contact with valuable gatekeepers and opportunities, stay in touch with trends, and maintain market visibility (McHenry, 2009). Artists in small and remote towns experience less face-to-face interaction with other artists. As cited by Gibson (2010), “remoteness means limited types of creative making; wariness of newcomer and new ideas; the loss of young people; limited access to business expertise, production services and training; lack of cultural stimulation; and high transport costs” (p. 4).

Continual pressure on artists, especially those who are young and emergent, encourages migration to cultural centers for ease of opportunity. The proximity inherent in urban areas promotes exchange and collaboration, and facilitates the mixing of ideas, cultures, and aesthetics, which exacerbates the idea of disparity between urban and rural arts and culture (Frink, 2012). The rural image problem, combined with well-known ease of urban opportunity and exchange, increases pressure on emerging creatives to temporarily migrate to urban “centers” but then never return (Gibson, 2010).

### **Policy and Support**

Not only is the rural challenged by economic transformation, population loss, and a disparity from urban “centers,” but there is a tendency for government to overlook the rural in policy and underestimate the importance of the arts, especially in non-metro areas (McHenry, 2009). The rural is neglected in cultural policy, and this is matched by a neglect of the cultural in rural policy (Bell & Jayne, 2010). A lack of policy and resource investment is echoed in the United States, but this problem is “beginning to be identified across governmental agencies and sectors” (Barrett, 2013, p. 26). Barrett points to a “policy window” that has begun to open due to government interest in rural issues, but “it remains to be seen as to whether or not this policy

window is open for rural arts and culture specifically” (Barrett, 2013, p. 27). It is essential that policy makers acknowledge the significant value of the rural, identify the challenges facing individually unique regions, and adapt specific and cautious agendas for conscientious development, rather than transplanting urbanized theories and policies (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Harvey, Hawkins & Thomas, 2012). Arts and culture development in rural context requires carefully crafted policy and practice responsive to the specifics of place and people.

The disregard of the rural in policy and public mind equates to inequities in funding and other support. There is a general lack of funding for rural arts and culture at all levels, but especially at federal and state. Only about 6% of private philanthropy and less than 1% of corporate grantmaking in America is devoted to rural development, and only 7% of NEA funding is granted to rural areas. Not only are the opportunities for funding fewer, but typical grant amounts are smaller for rural than for urban counterparts (Barrett, 2013; Fluharty, 2015). This is a distressing disparity considering that almost one third of the United States population lives in remote areas and small towns.

### **Rural and Urban Divide**

In America’s infancy, the rural was a site for progressive ideas. People moved westward to open land for opportunities unknown. Risk was part of life, and temporality hallmarked boom and bust towns that were sometimes deserted before the foundations were laid in the ground from which they suddenly sprang. Rugged individualism and survivalist mentality are characteristics we associate with the “frontier” and America’s early settlement history. The “country” was and always has been America’s backbone. The western cities we know now have their origins in this quest for the freedom and opportunity inherent in open space. The rural is

defined not just by geography but also by values (Sauter, 2014). The word “rural” derives from the idea of open space: “stemming from the Proto-Indo-European root *rur*, meaning simply ‘open space,’ it evolved into the Latin *rus*, ‘open land, country,’ and *ruralis* ‘of the countryside,’ becoming *rural* in the Old French of the fourteenth century” (Davy, 2010, p. 21). I argue that the rural can be identified with a conceptual openness as well as geographic expansiveness.

The “rural” has changed immensely, but this place to which we all were once so closely connected, is now, in many ways, a perceived idyllic figment of public imagination. The complex realities of rural America are largely ignored. Instead, our ideas of the rural are constructed from mainstream media that, more often than not, dichotomizes metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, defines the rural by disadvantage, and projects it as homogenous, simplistic, backwards and stuck in the past (Fluharty, 2015; Jansson, 2013). Rather than our cultural stories coming directly from the local and vernacular world, they are produced by strangers who have the power to mold national cultural identities. This simplification of complex cultural identities and aesthetics has assisted in the institutionalization and professionalization of the arts, diminishing unique vernacular culture in favor of a nationalized cultural elite (Ivey & Tepper, 2006).

The dichotomy of urban and rural is represented in different ways. Jansson (2013) proposes theories of “moral geographies” or specific values projected on to generalized geographies, and metaphysics of urban “flow” and rural “fixity” (p. 88). This theory of metaphysics demonstrates the perceived distinction of cities as “epicenters of trend setting, knowledge production, and consumerism” signifying “global openness,” and associates the rural with “tradition, authenticity, and community,” and rooted in “local security.” This produces two distinct “landscapes of desire” at odds with each other in the imagination.

## **Commodification of the Rural Idyll**

Romanticization of the rural transforms the countryside into a nostalgic representation of itself void of real challenges or contemporary issues (Sherman, 2015). “Deeply entrenched in the geographical imagination of Western societies,” the desired romantic fantasy of the pastoral rural idyll is commodified and marketed for consumption by certain affluent, elite groups of society, commonly through creative, cultural and recreational tourism (Kneafsey, 2001, p. 762). This commodification has resulted in concepts of the “global countryside,” the “urbanization of the rural,” and “rural gentrification,” which occurs as the country, wilderness or the rural is commodified for benefit of the hegemonic structures of capitalist society (Jansson, 2013):

Here the rural is thus incorporated within the metaphysics of flow in the shape of a valuable asset, even a ‘scarce resource,’ and counterbalance to expansionist, urban lifestyles, functioning as a means of structural reproduction and entertainment, often coinciding with recreational businesses such as wilderness tourism and spa centers... Its key spatial practices are consumption oriented: leisure, residence, counterurbanisation, dwelling, contemplation (Jansson, 2013, p. 95).

Related to these ideas of leisure, intangible local resources such as authentic experience, tradition, simplicity, slower-paced lifestyle, peace and relaxation are part of the commodified rural idyll (Jarabkova, 2012; Kneafsey, 2001). This often seems to take the form of opportunities for vacation, retreat, get-away, or escape from the responsibilities of modern daily life, and reinforces the projected identity of the rural as periphery or “other” in opposition with the modern urban center. Kneafsey (2001) discussed commodification centered around two main areas: 1) landscape, which includes “idealized countryside, vernacular buildings, leisure space, romanticism, emphasis on solitude, privacy and a personal semi-spiritual relationship;” and 2) “traditional culture” (p. 769).

According to Jarabkova (2012), rural tourism is “an instrument to improve the quality of places (municipalities) as well as to attract creative class and creative industries to rural

municipalities” (p. 5). Related to concepts of the creative class, this logic undermines the value of the rural in its contemporary reality, building on local assets to create environments attractive to a certain class of society, which in some cases seems to equate to eventually transforming the place into something more “city-like” rather than acknowledging its individual uniqueness. More caution should be taken in consideration of whether these strategies may be in the best interest of rural communities, and to what extent they may influence identity of place. It is counter-intuitive to establish rural tourism economies that commodify an irrelevant rural idyll that inequitably undermines contemporary rural realities, if the end goal is truly holistic quality of life. Locals wanting to become more modernized may prefer to distance themselves from traditional perceptions as to not be viewed as backwards or stuck in the past (Kneafsey, 2001). Rather than project tired images of an artificial rural idyll, we have a responsibility to consider the “contested, changing, and unique nature of places” (Kneafsey, 2001, p. 765).

### **Perceived Geographies and the Rural as “Other”**

Several authors (Davy, 2010; Fluharty, 2015; Frink, 2012; Jansson, 2013; Little, 1999) discuss the “othering” of the rural, which identifies an assumption that the rural is in opposition to everything that is the city. It becomes the peripheral, or everything outside of the central metropolis, both geographically and conceptually:

The situational dichotomy between the center and the periphery is a cultural and economic institution that birthed the polis, branded Robin Hoods and Cowboys, manufactured the bumper-sticker oppositions of both country bumpkins and city slickers and inspired (among other things) vast bucolic passages (Davy, 2010, p. 21).

This polarization of rural and urban results in debilitating stereotypes and assumptions that accompany the rural idyll. When real people or place contradict that idyll, or do not fit with expectations, they become the “other,” denied the credibility of honest meaning of the rural in

contemporary society (Little, 1999). We must look more consciously at the rural to understand and communicate the complexities, subtleties, and distinctions inherent across cultural geographies. We also need to take a closer look at shared experiences and realities across these imagined barriers to recognize commonalities between geographical regions (Poynter, 2016).

Center and periphery, and remoteness and proximity, are relative, for what might be considered the periphery in one context could be considered central in another. What might be remote from one thing might have proximity to something else. In a case study of Darwin, Australia, residents did not see the idea of remoteness as “lack,” and while Darwin was remote in terms of proximity to metropolitan areas, it benefited from other unique proximities (McHenry, 2009). Regions are relational and boundaries are unstable (Poynter, 2016). “Remoteness is as much a state of mind as a geographical reality” and now this is truer than ever as more people consistently move between, and identify with both rural and urban (Gibson, Luckman, & Willoughby-Smith, 2010, p. 36).

The media has the power to define societal centers and margins (Jansson, 2013). The idea of center and periphery is based on the “urban” as center, but what if the context for what defines “centrality” and “proximity” shifts? If we consider nature the ideal center for abundance of diverse life, then the city becomes the peripheral and the rural acquires greater value in terms of its proximity to nature. Ideas of centrality are fluid and changing, as well as definitions of urban and rural (Fluharty, 2015). The “rural” could even be considered a mobile theoretical positioning or condition rather than a place defined by proximity, especially through contemporary art (Davy, 2010; Gibson, 2010). In his essay, *Burn the Maps*, Fluharty (2015) “makes a case for rejecting calcified notions of ‘rural art’ and redrawing a geography of the cultural center (and periphery)” (para. 1) that defies simplistic representations:

As these counter-narratives emerge to establish new spatial stories, the cultural and economic throughways between country and city only make such terms as ‘country’ and ‘city’ more fluid, interpretative, unstable. We discover the periphery inside the center, the rural inside the urban. It was always there (Fluharty, 2015, para. 7).

### **The Dichotomy of Rural and Urban in Art and Creativity**

The dichotomy between rural and urban also permeates the arts, resulting in an urban bias fueled by “a longstanding commitment to traditional art forms and institutions, and predispositions about contemporary art practice defined by urban settings” (Sherman, 2015, p. 258). Many influences have increased prevalence of contemporary artists working in the rural: technological and communication advancements, population growth, the rise of arts education in universities, lower living expenses in rural areas, and a change in the way people define themselves as artists (Frink, 2012; Ivey & Tepper, 2006). Many artists seek the closeness to nature that can be found in the rural. Even though there has been an incredible growth of rural contemporary art, as a society we still “function under the old notion that progressive innovation comes from urban areas migrating outward to rural communities” (Frink, 2012, para. 5).

Contemporary art and professional artists have come to be associated with cities, and non-metro areas are affiliated with folk arts and crafts. “In early and mid-twentieth century America the term ‘regionalism’ was applied to artists that did not live in urban centers such as New York City. For many artists the term was a disparaging label. It usually meant, behind the times” (Frink, 2012, para. 2). These assumptions have fostered “cultural cringe,” creating insecurities related to local culture, and therefore placing greater value on culture from elsewhere, which can be highly destructive to social and cultural development in rural communities (Gibson, Luckman, & Willoughby-Smith, 2010). At its most extreme, this attitude can encourage the labeling of places as “culturally arid” when identified as permanently



peripheral to powerful cultural centers (Gibson, 2010). This identification is impossible of course, as all places have culture and aesthetics.

Proximity to audiences, resources, funding, and other factors encourages arts nonprofits to cluster in urban areas. According to a study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), “eighty-eight percent of performing arts organizations and art museums reside in areas with relatively large populations and pools of specialized workers needed to stage performances and exhibit art” (Iyengar, 2010, p. 11). The obvious result is that participation in these sort of institutions is higher in urban areas.

But the NEA study also demonstrates that when we look beyond formal institutions to consider the “informal” arts, which exist in both geographies, unlike museums and performing arts institutions, metro and non-metro participation levels out. This study was the first research publication by the NEA in several years to examine the informal arts, which includes arts activities such as playing an instrument, singing in a choir, creative writing, personal art-making, attending arts events at schools or places of worship, outdoor performing arts festivals, or craft fairs (ArtDaily.org, 2016). New technologies and increased utilization of the digital world have allowed for a revitalization of folk culture and participatory art making by those who don’t necessarily consider themselves to be professional artists (Ivey & Tepper, 2006). These arts activities are more inclusive and easily accessed, and are not as dependent on an urban environment to be sustained. Therefore, comparable participation rates in the informal arts are evidence of a “shared appetite for arts and cultural expression” (Iyengar, 2010, p. 12). The intrinsic desire for arts participation and expression is driven by human needs and exists equally in all cultural geographies.

The same digital world that has allowed for the rise of the amateur artist, interdisciplinary art making, and the curatorial individual has also made it easier for people to seek arts and culture content within their own home, instead of making an effort to participate in arts activities and events within their communities. “As a result, people make those drives into town for the arts less and less. They don’t need it as much. Factor in the cost of gas for lengthy Montana size trips, and the barriers are significant” (Stevens, 2007, p. 9). Arts and culture activities are essential to community wellbeing, especially in remote areas, but seem to have lost their status amidst a digital age when “culture” is readily accessed through a few taps on a screen.

To stay relevant, rural arts organizations need to do more to connect with their communities, which are often dispersed across wider geographies than in metropolitan areas. A study by the Montana Arts Council on building rural arts participation focused on three particular strategies: broadening audiences, deepening audiences, and diversifying involvement, which respond to the Wallace Foundation’s participation research (Stevens, 2007). The study showed that the public in this overwhelmingly rural state (with an average of 7 people per square mile) do want the arts, but they want art that is relevant. Stevens told the story of an awarded dance company that came to a small town but did not harmonize. “They spent a lot of time trying to involve the Hutterite Community, though we tried to explain that the Hutterites could not participate for religious reasons. And though we tried to explain the importance of the schools, the company did not see the importance of schools in rural communities until after the project” (Stevens, 2007, p. 29). Relevance, public value, face time, and making real, meaningful connections to the public were repeatedly emphasized. Organizations must build relationships with places and people through outreach, involvement and community work, and most importantly, work with and through the schools, which are commonly the social and civic centers

of rural communities. Building relationships in small towns can be difficult because these communities are wary of new enterprises that have a history of coming in and then leaving.

“Normally, when organizations are strapped for resources and fiscally conservative by nature, they don’t experiment” (Stevens, 2007, p. 14). But with greater policy presence and support comes potential for experimentation around flexible methods of engagement and discourse with rural constituencies through the arts. Responsiveness, collaboration and designing flexibility in engagement is critical, as well as meeting people where they are (Poynter, 2016).

“The [Montana] study showed that the arts here aren’t at all the province of a few, but are an interest of the majority. It found that Montanans are more likely to participate in the arts than in sports, civic activities or school activities,” with one of the top reasons for arts participation being shared experiences with other people (Stevens, 2007, p. 14). “That finding, alone, hit home with arts groups and gave them courage to take the risks involved in reaching out to build audiences. And it resonated with legislators who began to see that the arts were meaningful to the majority of Montanans” (Stevens, 2007, p. 15). It reinforced the fact that the arts do hold a prominent place in rural America, and that arts organizations need to listen, think outward, focus on relevance, and create connections to communities to increase public value.

Places that were once economic engines and bustling towns built on traditional economies have had to quickly adapt to the modern industrialization and technological advancements of the twenty-first century, and are now struggling to define themselves in an increasingly globalized world in which they are inequitably represented, and inefficiently supported. The misunderstanding and resulting misrepresentation of the rural is a major weakness to American progress as long as it persists (Sauter, 2014). Our definitions and

perceptions of “rural” are relative and constantly changing. What has become of the rural in the twenty-first century? What does it mean to be rural in contemporary society? How can contemporary art and experimentation help define a new rural narrative?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE RURAL CONTEXT**

“Art in the new rural is as much about the remaking of culture as it is remaking a culture of art.”

– Stephanie Sherman

This chapter explores the role of contemporary art in the rural, examining research related to economic, social, and community development. It investigates emerging theories around socially-based experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context, and broadly looks at research related to clusters of artists and arts activity.

#### **The Arts and Rural Economic Development**

Economic development seems to maintain prominence throughout much recent research on the role and impact of the arts in rural place. There is a large body of research centered on building creative industries, creative economies and cultural tourism in both rural and urban areas, although with a heavy focus on urban creative economies, encouraging diversification and building resiliency to revitalize communities. An issue brief from the National Governor’s

Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices (2005) provides a state-by-state survey of how the arts can improve rural economies through diversification and increased revenues, attracting visitors and investment, and eventually bettering quality of life. Parallel to much other research on creative economies, the NGA study explores the arts as key to creating job opportunities, enhancing quality of place, and attracting young knowledge workers to further stimulate the economy. While this view is beneficial from an economic perspective, it primarily focuses on the arts as a utilitarian tool for rural economic development, without acknowledging the more deeply-rooted, intrinsic social values and relationships to individual, expressive creativity and explorative inquiry. The “reifying of ‘creativity’ into a specific set of practices, seen predominantly as an economic development tool...represents a misconceptualization of the workings of contemporary rural economic and cultural life” (Bell & Jayne, 2010, p. 211).

Several sources argue that current theory on rural economic development through the arts adopts simplified urban practices and transplants them into a rural context, ignoring important distinctions specific to the unique complexities of rural cultural geographies (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Drake, 2003; Fleming, 2009; Gibson, 2010; Harvey, Hawkins, & Thomas, 2012). These authors observe theories of “creative industry,” “creative economies,” and “creative class” with a more critical lens and with a specifically rural focus. They identify that much of the literature conveys the role of “creatives” as saviors of the city and perceives creativity in a limiting way as an instrumental economic tool in service to post-industrial capitalism (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Gibson, 2010; Grierson, 2011). Even creative placemaking, which “is rooted in rural community arts and community cultural development practice, has largely developed into an urban-centric economic development strategy” (Poynter, 2016, para. 7). As a result of the prominence of the economic creativity discourse, we have witnessed a rush by cities, who desire to compete in the global

economy, to rebrand themselves as “creative” in the hopes of aligning with innovation, investment and economic fortune.

Researchers have looked for creativity in fairly obvious places (big cities, cities making overt attempts to reinvent themselves through culture, creativity and cosmopolitanism); have found it there; and have theorized about cities, creative industries and urban transformations as if their subsequent models or logic were universally relevant everywhere (Gibson, 2010, p. 3).

The theories surrounding creative economies have largely been discussed in relation to urban contexts, with much of the literature supporting this with generalizations about the power of the creative sector to revitalize urban neighborhoods, emphasizing people over nuances of place. Definitions of creativity, values, and “success” differ in varying cultural geographies, and determinations of “excellence” are best defined locally (Borrup, 2006; Fleming, 2009). Rural distinctions should be carefully considered when thinking about creative economic development. It is vital to better understand the unique characteristics of creativity in the countryside in order to implement arts and culture strategies responsive to the nuances and complexities of place.

### **Social, Cultural and Community Development**

Supplementing recent studies on rural arts and economic development, there is an existing body of research that explores the role of art and artists in enhancing community and influencing social and cultural development in small towns (Bayard, 2005; Borrup, 2006; Engh, 2013; Goldbard, 2006; McHenry, 2009, 2011). While not necessarily specific to any particular geography, the theories explored by such authors provide a framework for thinking about the arts in rural place as a medium for social reform, community building, and positive change.

There appears to be more formal research in rural economic development than on the role of the arts in improving social wellbeing in rural communities. McHenry (2009) conducted a

study on the social benefit of the arts in rural place to supplement the traditional economic standpoint. He states that “what is good for the economy is not necessarily good for society” (p. 63), which reinforces the significance of a holistic view of arts impact. Creativity itself and the motivations for migration to remote and small communities differ in rural compared to urban places. In contrast to the migration motivations of the so-called creative class, in Launceston, Tasmania, “creativity played little or no role in attracting people—instead migrations were motivated by the lure of Launceston’s ‘smallness’ (and promises of a quieter life), or the prosaic desire to be nearer family and loved ones” (Gibson, 2010, p. 4). Outside of the city, creativity is related less to the “buzz” milieu, and valued more in terms of social networks and community closeness (Gibson, 2010).

Research can be enlivened and made social, by not assuming a capitalist-oriented language of firms, growth, employment and export and instead valuing the communitarian purposes to which creativity can be put. From these social goals, highly visible local creative industries emerge. Indeed, perhaps there is something in the conduct of research in remote, rural and socio-economically disadvantaged places that brings into focus, much more sharply than in places of prosperity and cultural wealth, that it is ultimately people that together and through their individual and shared activities constitute what we call the creative economy (Gibson, 2010, p. 8).

The arts have transformative power in any geographical context, and can be enacted to serve as a vehicle for building rural resilience and adaptability, making individuals and communities better able to contend inequities and overcome challenges (McHenry, 2011; National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 2013). “Human capital is considered the most important resource in a small community,” and this is especially true in rural geographies where reliance on one another is essential (McHenry, 2011, p. 251). Within socially and culturally driven community development, the arts can impact individual and community well-being, increase confidence and morale, and create opportunities for expression (Borrup, 2006;



Goldbard, 2006; McHenry, 2009, 2011; Sauter, 2014). McHenry (2011) conveys the importance of keeping spirits high, particularly during difficult times.

At its core, this work is participatory, collaborative, and responsive to current social conditions which increases its relevancy to people and place (Goldbard, 2006). It provides vital “opportunities for social interaction and networking, which are essential for the health and wellbeing of rural and remote residents” (McHenry, 2011, p. 245). This social interaction can generate connectedness and cohesiveness, helping to establish a stronger sense of community that can support recognition of shared experience, exchange, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. It can also provide “means of engaging disempowered members of the community” (McHenry, 2011, p. 249). Rural places are especially notable for closeness of community and depth of relationships, and this environment can potentially benefit artists whose activities can become a part of the social fabric of that community (Sauter, 2014).

When all this is compounds, the arts can affect rural narratives. They can generate meaning, establish shared cultural identity, and build upon sense of place and community to create a more holistic understanding of the rural (Little, 1999; McHenry, 2009, 2011).

### **Critical Inquiry, Advocacy, and Social Action**

Experimental contemporary art practice can serve as an agent for critical inquiry, advocacy and social change, and maintains an influential role in civic engagement, discourse and democracy (Alinsky, 1971; Grierson, 2011; Handwerker & Saxton, 2014; Hunter, 2014). Rooted in the here and now, this work is timely and responsive, and when combined with open permission for experimentation, is fertile ground for critical discourse. Rural art should not be seen as a genre but rather as a platform for exploring identity, issues, and possible solutions,

rewriting narratives to reflect the complex realities and value of the rural, and positioning rural issues more visibly in national policy (Hunter, 2014; Sherman, 2015). This includes discourse around agriculture, land-use, and environmental sustainability. Hunter (2014) discussed five main influences that “may have encouraged contemporary art practitioners and curators to look more closely at agriculture and the rural as possible new zones for critical art practice and engagement” (p. 74). These include:

(i) the evolution of the Land Art movement, through its later ecological art and environmental art manifestations towards a new understanding of the rural as a complex sphere (social, political, and cultural) for contemporary art practice; (ii) a recognition by some leading cultural theorists, academics, and thinkers of the rural and agriculture as new arenas for aesthetic, ethical and philosophical reflection and debate; (iii) the influence of (urban) socially engaged art and critical art practice which has encouraged a new interest and critical insights about rural social, environmental, and economic policy; (iv) a growing recognition by rural leaders of the need for a cultural voice and cultural strategy by which to articulate their values and aspirations as part of the wider national discourse; (v) the importance of overarching global environmental issues and related policy initiatives for climate change and environmental sustainability (Hunter, 2014, p. 74).

There is “potential for more differentiated or radical modes of envisioning, representing, and producing the rural... the distinct ‘otherness’ of the rural thus incorporates a symbolic resource for social and cultural transformations... creative appropriation of new media for circulating alternative rural representations” (Jansson, 2013, p. 99). Contemporary art practice can explore what “rural” means in the twenty-first century, embracing tradition without being traditional, looking simultaneously back at the past and forward into the future to conceptualize what characterizes rural America in the present (Sauter, 2014). It can identify, interpret and communicate contemporary rural culture and aesthetics.

Some rural arts organizations and artist collectives across the United States are contributing to what is now a “rapidly coalescing international art movement located around a

new understanding of and engagement with the rural and agriculture as a challenging new site for contemporary art practice and curatorship” (Hunter, 2014, p. 73). Twenty-first century rural America sits at the crossing of many contradicting complexities that are pressing up and pushing against each other to create a unique cultural dynamic: the familiar and the strange, traditional and contemporary, material and immaterial, and permanent versus transitory.

Experimental contemporary art practice is well suited to engage with the complex dynamics of the rural because of its own timeliness, complexity, adaptability and multidisciplinary nature. This work does not shy away from experimentation, new ideas or risk taking, but embraces flexibility, change, and explorative process. It is not defined by specific materials, methods of working, or modes of presentation, and therefore maintains flexibility that allows it to be put to use in whatever way best serves the needs of its subject. Contemporary art is defined by its engagement with current and timely issues. It is inherently connected and relevant to the present. The versatility, ambiguity and timeliness that characterizes this practice enables artists to explore the complexities of contemporary rural context in a way that is holistic and multidimensional. I argue that this undefined practice is positioned outside the bounds of traditionally defined art forms, and is therefore potentially more relatable to those without formal arts knowledge. This work can easily be presented outside a conventional art context such as the “white box” gallery, and in ways that incorporate social elements that increase opportunities for engagement and accessibility. Without a fixed medium or context, it is able to adapt to whatever material, aesthetic, and presentation format is most relevant, relatable and engaging.

Static contemporary art has limited ability and relevancy, but when art and creative inquiry are mobilized with social action and engagement, new possibilities are created for community building, critical discourse, and positive change. In his classic work on community

organizing, Saul D. Alinsky (1971) discusses the balance between being passive and active, the value of conflict and critical perspective, and keeping an open mind. Alinsky emphasizes the importance of starting from where the world is, not where you want it to be. This idea reinforces the power of contemporary art, which is rooted in the present. The combination of social action, experimental freedom, and contemporary focus results in an art practice that can serve as a means to stimulate conscious awakening, facilitate understanding, and mobilize resistance to inequities and imposed cultural values, thereby enacting principles of critical consciousness and cultural democracy (Freire, 1973; Goldbard, 2006).

The promise of the arts in rural America lies not only in the ability to communicate contemporary rural narratives, but in the potential to empower residents to find specialized solutions for complex local problems as well as build resilience and civic participation, a predictor of empowerment (Engh, 2013; McHenry, 2009, 2011). “A rural area can launch initiatives that make use of artists’ ability to explore creative solutions for complex issues,” mobilize other makers and thinkers, bring people together, and infuse communities with creative energy (Engh, 2013, para. 10). Arming rural communities with attitudes of openness and imaginative thinking might leave them more ready to tackle complex challenges from the inside. Art as a catalyst for social change is especially relevant today as rural communities face the many challenges and inequities discussed thus far.

### **Isolation and Creative Freedom**

The remoteness, individualistic character and necessitated resourcefulness of the rural lends itself well to creative experimentation. “The innovation and originality associated with an avant-garde isn’t all that different from the pioneer spirit and rugged individualism attributed to

rural dwellers” (Sauter, 2014). Rural arts organizations “are self-sufficient, and capable of producing a great deal with very little” (Stevens, 2007).

Rural arts practice is unique because of a degree of isolation that affects distinctive local character and aesthetics, deep community closeness and connection to place. Wealth of space and time, commonly associated with rural artist residencies, allows for extensive reflection and creative process. In contrast to later discussion on creative clusters, some artists prefer working in isolation, removed from the intensity of dense creative networks, to focus on their own abilities and maximize production without distraction (Drake, 2003).

The remoteness of the rural and its separation from institutionalized standards, trends and expectations may facilitate greater creative freedom and integrity. “The sense of a certain rural resistance,” and “its negotiating proximity from the centralizing agencies of bureaucracy” might contribute to why experimental models of art practice are finding themselves at home in rural America (Davy, 2010, p. 22). Bell and Jayne (2010) cites two sources who comment on the value of remoteness: “distance creates freedom to experiment and follow a different course” and “it is urban culture which is staid and conventional with the countryside the true site of innovation” (p. 211). Gibson (2010) and others discuss ways in which remoteness is “considered by many to be a delight, bringing solitude and freedom from metropolitan whims and fashions” (p. 5). A remote environment allows the work to be what it is, leaving it raw and “unpasteurized,” protected from the pressures of institutional influences and generalizations that may cloud the vibrancy of individual creative thought. “Small populations limit the possibilities of distinct ‘scenes’ forming around specific creative activities,” therefore encouraging more experimental, interdisciplinary work across multiple mediums and categories (Gibson, Luckman, & Willoughby-Smith, 2010, p.

32). That smallness prohibits specific cultures from isolating themselves, and forces interaction with diverse people.

### **Rural Place and Aesthetics as Creative Inspiration**

People and enterprises in rural communities are deeply linked to place. The unique characteristics of rural geography and culture can serve as a catalyst for conceptual and aesthetic inspiration, and it seems that local distinctiveness can be sustained in the rural more easily than in a fast paced and ever-changing metropolis. As cited by Gibson (2010), “remoteness can be woven into claims about distinctiveness and quirkiness (said to be a product of isolation)” (p. 5).

Of course, in the same way that remoteness and cultural distinctiveness can support artistic experimentation rooted in place and community, it can also be commoditized and sold to larger markets, as explained earlier in discussion around cultural and creative tourism.

High levels of creative enterprise are not essential for place-based influence and stimulus for individual creativity, but place can influence individual creativity in other ways (Drake, 2003). Unique characteristics of place play a key role in the development of specific conceptual and physical aesthetics. In speaking about the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, Davy (2010) stated that it is “set within the landscape rather than merely against it as a backdrop” (p. 22). It is interesting to consider how artists might respond to place to create unique exploratory projects connecting rural aesthetics, context, and the rural experience (Drake, 2003; Handwerker & Saxton, 2014). “In the process of responding to place individuals and groups *construct* place... the same place will be interpreted differently by different individuals and will provide different prompts and aesthetic raw materials” (Drake, 2003, p. 513). If working in a way that is

responsive and connected, artists can build a stronger sense of place, communicating multiplicities of identity and meaning associated with specific places and people (Engh, 2013).

### **Connection, Collaboration and “Creative Clusters”**

There is little existing research on artist collectives, artist residencies or similar organizational structures in a rural context. Some sources provide analysis of creative clusters as effective generators for creative activity in rural place (Borup, 2006; Drake, 2003; Harvey, Hawkins & Thomas, 2012), but they focus primarily on a more economic idea of a “creative cluster” as a grouping of creative industries, which may include artists and arts organizations along with creative entities. Proposed strategies include creating live/work spaces and gathering places for artists; making use of vacant real-estate; providing resources, training and support; organizing events; and stimulating street-level activity to establish climates of creativity (Borup, 2006; Engh, 2013; Harvey, Hawkins & Thomas, 2012). Although these studies are not specific to artist collectives in a traditional sense, they do provide perspective as to how clusters can support creative practice in a rural context, and in many ways relate closely to the structures of co-ops, guilds, residencies, and collectives through emphasis on spaces for artists, density of people and ideas, collaboration, and higher levels of creative activity.

The connective and collaborative nature of artist collectives and artist residencies serve as a framework for nurturing creative experimentation and facilitating learning and growth in a rural setting. Several sources stress the close relationship of people and place as important to the development of successful creative endeavors in rural areas (Drake, 2003; Engh, 2013; Gibson, 2009, 2011; Harvey, Hawkins, & Thomas, 2012). “Cultural industries are people intensive rather than capital intensive,” therefore employing organizing structures to connect people is a

relatively straightforward way of creating environments for cultural activity (Gibson, 2010, p. 2). These organizational structures can assist in building lasting networks and strengthening relationships among artists as well as with community, connecting creative people across towns and reducing isolation (Engh, 2013). Studies emphasize building networks to decrease isolation among artists and organizations, increase sustainability and support development. Creative clusters, however they are defined, can provide a structured framework to support artist networks and creative activity in rural regions.

Assumptions of what creative places should look like or where creative clusters can exist are over-simplified. As stated by Drake (2003), “current theory tends to underplay the significance of creative enterprises located outside highly networked clusters where workers are operating in relative spatial or economic isolation” (p. 515). These ideas challenge mainstream constructions of urban creative economies and “explore ‘other geographies’ of cultural production” (Harvey, Hawkins & Thomas, 2012, p. 537).

The timely and critically conscious nature of contemporary art is combined with creative experimentation and active social engagement to produce a socially-based contemporary art practice that can explore specific rural issues in a holistic and multidimensional way. These ideas are reinforced by a growing network of artists and organizations exploring these concepts through an array of projects as diverse as the people invested in them and the unique places that they activate. These immersive artist-organized projects are being developed in rural areas not typically perceived as cultural centers, and certainly not in places congruent with public perceptions of contemporary art.



The following case studies provide illustrative examples of six organizations in the United States that exemplify the focus of this study. These organizations identify as either rural artist collectives or artist residencies, or operate with an artist residency program as a foundational aspect of the organization. They express a focus on experimental contemporary art and emphasize socially-based practice. The case studies serve to demonstrate how these organizations are supporting experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context. Each case study investigates the history, purpose, philosophy and programs of the organization to provide a holistic depiction of how and why they conduct their work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CASE STUDY: WORMFARM INSTITUTE, REEDSBURG, WI

The Wormfarm Institute is exemplary when it comes to groundbreaking work in rural arts and culture and rural creative placemaking. Founded in 2000 by Jay Salinas and Donna Neuwirth, the Wormfarm began as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) and an opportunity to share the wealth of art, food and farming with other artists. Community Supported Agriculture has become a popular model for purchasing “local, seasonal food directly from a farmer” through a certain number of public “shares” offered by the farm (<http://www.localharvest.org/csa/>, May 30, 2016). Over time, a nonprofit organization was formed and the artist residency grew into a structured program that formalized work they were already doing (Kane-Grade, 2012). Presently, the Wormfarm Institute is run by three staff, with the artist residency as its foundation and other programs, particularly the nationally recognized Fermentation Fest, that have propelled the organization into rapid expansion (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/>).

Wormfarm’s founders transplanted themselves from Chicago to a 40-acre former dairy farm five miles outside of Reedsburg, Wisconsin (now a population of 9,000), with a decidedly

urban perspective that evolved as they immersed themselves in learning to grow food in rural Reedsburg. They had looked to Art Farm in Nebraska as early inspiration, but at the time did not have any models of the work they were doing, specifically in relation to farming.

Neuwirth described the process of experimenting and stumbling with misperceptions during that early time. “We brought assumptions with us from elsewhere that led us to try a variety of things that didn’t really work here. When we acquired a building downtown we became truly invested in this community and were motivated to experiment” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). The gallery they opened in downtown Reedsburg was, at first, a gallery in the way they understood in Chicago. “People didn’t come,” said Neuwirth. She emphasized that while it was valuable for them to experiment, when people did respond to something versus something else, it was important to be responsive, and to initiate a dialogue.

So it’s not that what we did, even though people didn’t show up, wasn’t of great value, it was of huge value, and I think that’s the wonderful thing about small rural places is that you have lots of room to experiment, and people tend to be generous... Once you gain the attention of people who you may not have thought were your audience, then it starts to get really interesting (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

I think it’s that stumbling, revising and trying again that led to programs that connect, and where our curatorial vision was formed (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The process led Neuwirth and Salinas to rethink the idea of a gallery, permitting them to have fun with the process in an effort to make the space more relevant and relatable. In the end they established a welcoming and accessible public space that drew visitors who were no longer afraid of the word “gallery.” Once the Woolen Mill Gallery was established, Wormfarm became more invested in the future of the town, which gave rise to other programs.

## **Philosophy and Purpose**

The Wormfarm Institute is deeply committed to exploring the intersections of art, agriculture, and ecology “to rekindle the cultural and enhance the economic possibilities of [the] region while celebrating its’ unique natural and human history” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). They are dedicated to contributing to regional cultural vibrancy and embrace the idea of the “cultureshed,” a term created by co-founder Jay Salinas, that describes:

1) Geographic region irrigated by streams of local talent and fed by deep pools of human and natural history 2) An area nourished by what is cultivated locally. 3) The efforts of writers, performers, visual artists, scholars, farmers and chefs who contribute to a vital and diverse local culture” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>).

This regional “cultureshed,” and the work of Wormfarm, is reflective of local geography and culture, responsive to the surrounding community, and anchored in place. The organization’s emphasis on “local” is directly related to deeper awareness around environmental stability and sustainable agriculture that is central to their mission. Recent economic changes and environmental concerns have renewed interest in local food and agriculture, and fueled reconsiderations about importing food and entertainment from elsewhere (Kane-Grade, 2012; Worland, 2014). For Wormfarm, it’s not only about food, but land, water, carbon, and other resources. They believe in the diverse disciplines of the arts to investigate the holistic context and complexities of such crucial concerns. This means bringing together artists, writers, farmers and scientists through the arts to contribute to a national conversation around sustainability and human relationship to land.

The heart of their work, as described by Neuwirth, “is at that fertile intersection of farming and art-making. And what we have done over the years is find different ways to explore the richness of the soil at that intersection” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Neuwirth explained that artists play a critical role in directing public attention, and when

the rural is the stage, artists can encourage people to look at land differently, as well as reconstruct values connected with local food, the farmer, farm, and rural culture. Rather than transplanting ideas from elsewhere, they work towards a responsive “awakening” of what already exists. Such work values agricultural regions as places essential to the wellbeing of the nation, and places where the arts and creative activity can prosper. Their website states, “through the vision of artists we explore the timeless connections between land and people” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/>). Art and culture have always been inseparable from agriculture (the word “culture” is derived from Latin *cultus* that means “to till the soil”) until recent decades have immensely altered life in rural communities. The Wormfarm is rooted in this timeless tradition of integrating culture and agriculture through a more contemporary approach, emphasizing the vitality of these connections to the health of rural regions (Worland, 2014).

One of the significant aspects of the Wormfarm Institute is how they create links between urban and rural, and encourage cross-sector collaboration both within and beyond food.

Neuwirth explains:

We are in south-central Wisconsin, halfway between Chicago, Minneapolis and one-hundred miles from Milwaukee, and all those cities are reliant upon what the land here produces, and so if we think of each other as part of a shared region, a culturareshed, then we can be better neighbors, and the benefits will extend to both sides of the continuum” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

It’s very much about urban and rural co-dependence on the land and its gifts. We find creative ways to celebrate land and those who care for it, and with the local food movement, we’re at an extraordinary moment in time to do more ambitious and even subversive things at the intersection of culture and agriculture (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The Wormfarm Institute explores the related processes of art and farming, both bound in creation and experimentation, growth and time, as well as connected to resources and place.

Some programs and activity at Wormfarm change with the seasons, and the organization itself is

naturally evolving, never the same at any moment in time. As Neuwirth explains, their work is rooted in momentary experience and exemplifies the idea of social sculpture:

Probably influenced by Joseph Buys, we make no distinction between making something in the studio and making things happen in the world. Everything that we do, whether it's a socially engaged project downtown or the ecosystem of the residency program during the farm season where artists are introduced to cows, worms, and chickens; art-infused social interactions across geography, sectors and across species (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Fermentation is particularly relevant in terms of transformation, decomposition, and process, all of which are ideas that play out in the annual Fermentation Fest. In speaking about the festival, Neuwirth explains “Fermentation is about abundance and transformation. We think of this [project] as a kind of social probiotics. If you install artists and art opportunities in a rural landscape, wonderful, good bacteria forms” (<http://fermentationfest.com/>). Wormfarm acts as an “evolving laboratory of the arts and ecology,” and like any laboratory, experimentation, exploration, and process are inherent to the work. Resulting programs and projects are multidisciplinary and manifest in diverse, unexpected, and imaginative ways.

### **The Artist Residency**

The foundational program of Wormfarm, the artist residency acts as a creative generator, continually providing fresh perspectives from artists visiting from all over the country to make work, participate in agricultural processes, and fully inhabit this very specific place. The seasonal influx of artists energizes and sustains the spirit of Wormfarm, informing all other explorations.

Wormfarm seeks “artists and writers with an interest in sustainable systems, connection to the land, and our place in the natural world,” and “for whom the engagement with a working farm is an attractive and alluring prospect” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). “Artists pretty much

self-select,” said Neuwirth, “and through the application process we look for those who are a good fit for our program” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). The residency isn’t for everyone, and after staff have narrowed their selection, they conduct interviews and “basically try to talk them out of it,” ensuring that they are indeed a good match (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The residency season operates from May through October, and hosts up to three artists at a time. Residences last from two weeks to five months, but a minimum of two months is preferred for the artists to reap the most from the time they sow at Wormfarm (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). “The more they connect to the growing season, the better” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Similar to traditional residencies, artists are provided the time and space to support their creative advancement and a venue to collaborate and share their work, but the residency is not a retreat, and rather an engagement in the life of a working farm. “The residents spend three hours a day in the garden, and are very much tied to the daily rhythms of the farm, which means the plants, animals, and the land itself” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Artists live and work at the farm in exchange for contribution of 15 hours toward farm operations. They are provided the opportunity to deeply connect with ideas around sustainable agriculture and rural place, and their work is often reflective of that experience.

Artists have access to outbuildings, woods, pasture, gardens, and invasive species, and share the land with other animal residents. As with most farms, piles of abandoned farm equipment and other debris accumulate for potential reuse. The experience is not easy nor entirely comfortable. As Neuwirth explained, “they’re in old ramshackle farm buildings, stepping over cow pies in order to go back and forth between the studio and the WiFi access” (D.

Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). They often share meals, which generate a unique culinary culture. “There’s a lot of baking, fermenting and experimenting, and it’s often difficult to tell where the art begins and the cooking ends” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Inspiration from the land, involvement with agriculture, connection with each other, and access to everything in that environment provides fodder for creativity unlike any residency in a traditional studio setting. Even for artists who may come to do exactly what they planned, “the daily stimulus and inspiration wiggles its way through the work. We may not know that when they’re here, but we may find out years later when a show is mounted or a book is published and there is something we recognize. Artists can’t help but respond to their surroundings” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Their removed location outside of town means that the residents aren’t particularly connected with the Reedsburg community, but there are intersections with downtown businesses, weekly trips to town, and relationships developed with community members. “There’s this wonderful kind of neighborliness, but the program is somewhat isolated in the countryside,” Neuwirth explained (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016). The artists are asked to share the results of their creative efforts with the local community through an annual exhibition at the downtown gallery each fall, and other collaborations which might include “public readings, performances, artist talks, workshops or classes (for longer residencies), possible participation in the [Fermentation Fest] DTour, or other options that may present themselves,” according to the residency application. “A large audience is in no way guaranteed, but they have a growing following, and Reedsburg is a great place to experiment” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/artist-residencies/residency-details/>). For longer residencies,



Wormfarm will assist artists who may want to do a more community engaged project, if that is within their interest.

### **Other Program and Project Strategies**

Other programs have evolved from the seasonal infusion of artists, which are more socially and community based.

“Decomposium” is an “annual, half-day public symposium that explores the creative potential of decomposition and renewal through the lens of scientists, musicians, farmers, and poets.” It also serves as inspiration for the D-composition project, a concert series that takes place each year during the Fermentation Fest, “in which musical composers are commissioned to rearrange, remix, or otherwise ‘decompose’ preexisting musical material in their own idiom” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/programs/decomposium/>).

Wormfarm is known for its Roadside Culture Stands, artist-built mobile farm stands and outreach “vehicles” that vend fresh local produce, books and art. Artists design and build the structures, competitively commissioned by Wormfarm, who looks for “artistic excellence in design, context, innovation and spirit of community collaboration” in their selections (Rolfsmeyer, 2010, para. 8). Together the stands create a vibrant marketplace at events, festivals and fairs or stand alone in both rural and urban settings, spreading the impact of Fermentation Fest throughout the year. They serve to remind the public of the connection between food and culture, providing nutrients for mind and body, and explore the arts as a marketing vehicle for agricultural products. They present a vibrant, fun experience, and thus have the potential to engage new consumers to support local food and art, and draw passersby to other cultural

attractions where they are situated, therefore mobilizing art to direct public attention and associate value. (Herzog, 2010; Rolfsmeyer, 2010).

In rural settings, these structures reinforce the message “Eat the View,” suggesting that “to preserve working rural landscapes, we must eat from the food chain that created them” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/programs/culturestands/>). Urban stands bring a bit of the country into the city, reminding residents of the origins of their food, and providing fresh, healthy food to inner-city neighborhoods. Barbara Lawton, President of the Wisconsin Arts Board and former Lieutenant Governor, said the stands are “the quintessential example of how a work of art can work to promote sustainable agriculture, good health, cultural tourism, and animate a regional economy all at once” (Herzog, 2010).

By far the most notable, public, and organic outcome of the Wormfarm’s artist-run laboratory is Fermentation Fest—A Live Culture Convergence, an annual celebration and multi-sensory experience of food, farming, fermentation, and the arts. “It’s a colorful and potent mixture of ideas, food, education, entertainment and public art that can’t be neatly boxed” (Godfrey, 2015, para. 9). Fermentation Fest features “live culture” in every form “from yogurt to dance, and poetry to sauerkraut,” encouraging attendees to engage with both culinary and cultural fermentation. (<http://wormfarminstitute.org/programs/fermentation-fest/>). According to Neuwirth, “some people may come for the farming and trip over the art, while other people come for the art and trip over the farming” (Kane-Grade, 2012, para. 5).

The fall festival brings together thousands of people from both rural and urban places, drawn by curiosity and fascination and lured by the land to a social art and cultural experience unique to the region. Through this sense of wonder, Wormfarm hopes to encourage the public to pay attention to what is happening in rural place at this present moment. “If all those visitors are

paying a closer attention to how food is raised and how that land is used, then we have the beginnings of the ability to create thriving regions” (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

During the festival, a series of fermentation-focused tastings, lectures and hands-on workshops are hosted by experts in every area of fermentation, from kimchi and chocolate to composting and pickling, all taking place within walking distance of each other in downtown Reedsburg (Kane-Grade, 2012).

The main event is the Farm/Art DTour, a 50 mile free, interactive and self-guided backroads tour, by whatever mode of transportation is preferred, through Sauk County’s farm fields, woods, wetlands, and small towns. Pop-up bike shops provide support to those who choose to bike for the full sensory experience, and limited edition DTour Passports can be purchased for special perks. Temporary art installations, pasture performances, roadside poetry, PassWords, Field Notes, Farm Forms, Roadside Culture Stands and more are interspersed along the tour, accentuating the landscape. Field Notes, “educational signs made by artists to explain farm-related concepts,” draw attention to the land and related agricultural processes. Pasture Performances take place on unconventional outdoor stages featuring music, dance, theatre, yoga and other surprises (<http://fermentationfest.com/dtour>). Both artists, farmers and visitors share in the creative impulse inspired by the land along the DTour.

Each year, a diverse group of artists and creative teams from across the country are commissioned to conceptualize site-specific installations that draw upon the landscape and its rich cultural and ecological history. Audience interaction ranges from drive-by observation to direct engagement. Wormfarm specifically seeks artists “interested in engaging with the agricultural landscape, the farmers, landowners and surrounding communities,” and funds

projects at a \$5,000 level and \$2,000 level as well as provides an additional travel stipend. Selection criteria includes: “artistic excellence, visual impact, community engagement, demonstrated ability to realize [large-scale outdoor projects], and feasibility in the context of [the] larger event” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). Before developing their full proposal, artists attend a two-day orientation in the prior spring to deepen their understanding of the festival and the environment, meet with landowners, other artists and organizers, share meals and ideas.

The artwork is site-responsive to be sure, and many [projects] can be understood as social practice.... it’s about the relationship between the artists and the farmer, the farm’s history, where the equipment might be borrowed, and its story. Folks from the community become involved in exciting, collaborative ways we had never even expected (D. Neuwirth, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Farmers, landowners, community groups, businesses, and students are invited to contribute by constructing Farm Forms along the route, emphasizing “large scale, use of natural materials, and unique concept” (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). Some examples include labyrinths, fence weavings, straw bale sculptures, and painted silage bags. The map accommodates a limited number of these creative community collaborations, but much like the organic process of their fermented counterparts, new things bubble up that aren’t on the map. Called “rogue installations” these creations by local folks who may or may not consider themselves artists, supplement the commissioned art installations and Farm Forms in surprising and clever ways.

The Wormfarm Institute is a shining example of rural creative placemaking, and what some call “agritourism” (Worland, 2014). The organization’s success is reliant on its relationship with community, to the Sauk County Arts and Culture Committee, local farmers, artists, and businesses, the Sauk County Board, UW Extension office, City of Reedsburg, and Reedsburg Area Chamber of Commerce (<http://wormfarminstitute.org>). Beyond the economic and cultural

benefits, Wormfarm mobilizes artists to explore the contemporary intersections of culture and agriculture, and employs imagination to invite both urban and rural people to explore contemporary rural and ecological issues within a “laboratory” of creative and cultural experimentation.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CASE STUDY: WASSAIC PROJECT, WASSAIC, NY

Now seamlessly integrated and embraced by the community of Wassaic, New York (population 1,524), the Wassaic Project began as an outside intervention. Now a converted exhibition space, the seven-story Maxon Mills grain elevator was used to process and store animal feed until the 1980s when it was closed and later condemned in 2005. It is of the last remaining wood-crib elevators in the country, but it has “come to symbolize the decline of this former mill and ironworks town” (Rhode Island School of Design, 2011). Recognizing its historic value, an architect and developer team stepped in to save the structure and to create a space for community. In 2008, the current trio of Wassaic Project co-founders proposed hosting a contemporary arts festival in the renovated structure, and “with the prospect of breathing new life into the building and opening the space up to the public,” it was agreed to move forward (<http://wassaicproject.org/>).

Despite at first not having a focused plan, not unlike many other emergent arts organizations, the first summer festival at Wassaic was an unexpected success. According to co-founder Jeff Barnett-Winsby, it “was a sort of experiment as a social practice piece” with simple

goals based in creating opportunities for fun and happiness: hoping people would come, hoping they would learn something new, and that they might make friends (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Wassaic Project leadership began fundraising to establish the festival as a regular, free event and it quickly expanded from that point forward, allowing the organization to incorporate as a 501(c)(3) in 2010.

The biggest evolution of the Wassaic Project has been the move from creating a temporary community to establishing a permanent one. The dual-season residency, presence of the Lantern bar, and the winterization the mill, which now allows for continuous year-round arts education, signifies their transition from an event-based to place-based organization with roots in the town and stewardship by the community (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Even as the Wassaic Project becomes more established, they maintain commitment to impermanence:

One of the things we talk about as co-directors, is that if in ten years the Wassaic project looks totally different, that is fine with us. Because it means that we are adapting to what our community needs, which changes over time (E. Biddle, personal communication, April 12, 2016).

Beyond the Maxon Mills, the Wassaic Project converted the adjoining Wassaic House Hotel and nearby Luther Barn into spaces for offices, exhibitions, studios, and performance. The livestock auction barn previously served as a center of commerce and connectivity between New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts, and “played an important role as one of the few establishments that brought together farmers from all three states” (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). Animal stalls are now artist studios, the auction ring now a film and performance venue, and the back of the barn has been transformed into a woodshop and screen-printing studio. These unique and historic buildings are central to the identity of the Wassaic Project and the town itself. Through the creative energy of artists and a diverse range of vibrant programming and projects,

they are transforming the historic buildings of Wassaic into energetic public spaces. The Wassaic Project has deeply rooted itself in the community through these buildings but also through close collaboration with the volunteer fire department, management of the town bar and pizza restaurant, and simply through being present and embedding themselves in the place.

The Wassaic Project staff consists of three co-directors (Bowie Zunino, Eve Biddle, and Jeff Barnett-Winsby), Programming and Exhibitions Director, Programming and Exhibitions Coordinator, Education Director, Residency Director, Installations, and program directors for music, dance, and film. They also award a Design Fellow and a Print Fellow, and have developed robust advisory committees for their art, music, dance, film and writing programs. The advisory committee expands their outreach and promotion, helping to make the residency program more appealing to diverse and international artists.

### **Philosophy and Purpose**

The mission of the Wassaic Project is to “provide a genuine and intimate context for art making and strengthening local community by increasing social and cultural capital through inspiration, promotion and creation of contemporary visual and performing art” (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). It exemplifies the convergence of contemporary creative experimentation and community-based art, and embraces boundless disciplines and partnerships.

There is an element of the unexpected and sometimes a “strangeness” in the work, but this is balanced by an emphasis on play, exploration, and imagination that creates entryways for the public to connect in an inviting setting. “Play isn’t just an intoxicating moment. It’s about having fun and freedom to try different things, and that’s a key part of art practice.” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Not only is play essential for the artist, but it is



vital to inspire interaction and participation. “If there are more people in the parade than there are watching, it means the parade was a success” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Everything that the Wassaic Project organizes has a food, drink and music component that makes the activity more welcoming. As Barnett-Winsby explained, “if you’re at a table full of people and you want to invite more people, you simply have to get up and bring more empty chairs, and someone will feel there is a place for them.” For the Wassaic Project, it is essential to help people feel welcome and included, otherwise they might be wary of pulling up their own chair (Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). These analogies speak well to what the Wassaic Project is trying to achieve.

While any contemporary arts organization can activate a venue with the presentation of contemporary art, the true potential of the Wassaic Project lies in its meaningful collaboration with the town. “We realized the importance of inhabiting this project and really living it,” says co-founder Bowie Zunino (Rhode Island School of Design, 2011, para. 7). From the beginning, harmonizing and making good neighbors with the community was essential. This meant going door to door to ease and anticipate frustrations, throwing parties and potluck barbeques, or pumping out the entire town after a flood:

In the spring of 2011, a drenching rainstorm hit the frozen ground, and the hamlet was flooded. Mr. Barnett-Winsby and Mr. Eckstrom of Ghost of Dream bought every pump they could find at Home Depot, and after they had pumped out the Wassaic Project’s nine buildings, they began pumping out the rest of the town. “Everyone in town suffered,” Mr. Barnett-Winsby said. “And I think people started to see us as people, not just weekenders or what have you. That was really important” (Green, 2015).

Initiating genuine, face-to-face interaction with community members, and inviting feedback permitted shared ownership and stewardship, reinforcing the fact that the Wassaic Project wasn’t imposing on the town. They established an early partnership with the fire

department which shared ownership and encouraged others to feel more comfortable participating. “When you think about what’s special about the fire department, it’s all volunteer. It is this civic-minded social service organization, and that volunteerism is already built in” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, 2016). This seems to have extended community respect for the fire department towards the Wassaic Project, allowing them to attract broader audiences. For Barnett-Winsby, who is Head Fire Commissioner and also on the zoning board of appeals, his relationship to the community is of utmost importance:

One of the things I have been wrestling with is the transition from thinking about this project as a social art piece to a moment where I’m no longer comfortable with that position of authority in relationship to the townspeople. We all are actively engaged in this community, and never would I want anyone to think that it’s something I wouldn’t be doing without the art shroud we’re asking people to engage with. I’m not playing a role. I am being myself (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

The Wassaic Project has proven itself as an economic and social stimulus in the region, especially through the festival. “The artists and staff increase the downtown population by ten percent, and exhibitions and events bring a steady stream of visitors” (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). The organization is also committed to the wellbeing of the town and townspeople, and to the ethical and honorable growth and revitalization of the community.

The artists invited through the residency and festival can be described as emergent, dynamic, fluid, and transformative. The Wassaic Project recognizes the pivotal early moments in the careers of young, emerging artists, when they are most in need of support. The idea of connecting the small hamlet with a revolving group of energetic minds was to fuel vitality of place, build creative capital, and “to reengage the town with itself” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). This continual “creative brain power,” as described by Eve Biddle, acts as an idea generator and encourages them to think outside the box, “not just in terms

of arts programming but in terms of innovative approaches to real world problems” (E. Biddle, personal communication, April 12, 2016). The project is an experiment in bringing together a small, rural town, creative minds, and dynamic, multidisciplinary projects to support emerging artists and to build community.

The Wassaic Project exemplifies the power of artists in creative placemaking, acting as agents of transformation and change, and using their creative abilities to strengthen social and cultural capital as well as for economic benefit. For a town that has suffered economic loss of local industry, the possibility of reigniting energy in the community through art was welcomed over time (Meier, 2012). Rick Lowe echoed these ideas in a talk he gave at Wassaic in 2013. He spoke about how artists can reinstate meaning within buildings and towns that have lost investment, reimagining such places, and unlike traditional developers, experimenting and taking risks in ways that involve all aspects of community, and that can have surprising results (The Wassaic Project, 2013). For Barnett-Winsby, creative placemaking is about people, and place is a construct around which people can organize. “The Wassaic Project is a toothsome example of how artists schooled in social practice—that is, art that combines education, community engagement and social activism—can re-energize not just structures but entire towns” (Green, 2015, para. 8).

A significant number of Wassaic resident artists engage in some type of socially-based practice. According to Barnett-Winsby, some of their programming could potentially fall under this title as well, but it seems that the Wassaic Project, much like other artists and organizations, has an uneasy relationship with the term “social practice.” This language is still often used to describe an art practice that is not easy to communicate:

Calling what we do “social practice” at this point is limiting. In the beginning it was liberating because it allowed everything that we did to develop organically... and it

allowed for a model of development for a type of organization that was much better suited to listen and respond to the needs of the community than if we had followed the traditional, nonprofit development approach... I think it needs to be a much more playful thing, and I guess the problem that I'm having with it at this point is that where once it was an inclusive device, it is turning into an exclusionary device (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

### **The Artist Residency**

The year-round residency program was established to anchor the organization more deeply in Wassaic beyond the summer activities, and is split into a summer and winter season. It is competitive and involved, fueling the education programs and summer exhibition. According to co-director Eve Biddle, "in some ways, the exhibition and residency programs are in service to our community and education programs" (E. Biddle, personal communication, April 12, 2016). These connected arms of the organization inform each other in a cyclical way.

Wassaic primarily seeks emerging contemporary artists, writers and other creatives working in diverse media "who want to produce, explore, challenge, and expand on their current art making practices, while participating in a grass roots, community-based organization. Selection is based on quality of work, commitment to their practice, and ability to interact positively with the community at large" (<http://wassaicartistresidency.org/>). Interviews provide the opportunity for staff to manage expectations and get to know the artist.

"Part of what we're trying to do here is this more engaged type of art making," said Jeff Barnett-Winsby. He explained that as the Wassaic Project moves towards more engagement-based programs, they are looking for work that incites conversation, and does not exist simply for shock value or meaningless abstraction. As part of this direction, artists who propose more relevant or community-based work receive higher marks, as opposed to those who "explore an

established practice within the confines of a studio” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

In terms of the residents in general, I’m looking for people that want to be here. I’m looking for people that aren’t going to hide, but who want to go hang out at the bar and talk to people, or participate in potlucks, go hiking, and engage in a community. And if it’s the greater community at large, that’s even better (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

Up to nine artists consistently live and work at Wassaic for a period of one to six months. The appeal of working in the heart of a rural community seems to be part of the allure, although the setting is not ideal. In an interview with the New York Times, Zunino explains that living and working at Wassaic is a bit rough. “Your studio will be a barn. If there’s tons of water outside, chances are there’s going to be a bit of water inside, too. It’s all about managing expectations” (Green, 2015). Existing comments collected from artist exit surveys reveal the value of being able to focus on studio practice in an environment that permits space and time:

The summer studio spaces are absolutely incredible. I haven’t had the space to make work and really get messy in a big barn in a very, very long time; the opportunity to have such SPACE and TIME ripped open the latent, full-of-potential aspects of my practice and let them develop. (Artist Exit Survey, 12/3/2012, <http://wassaicartistresidency.org/>)

By far the most common theme conveyed throughout these comments was the comradery and tightknit community among residents. Artists expressed the immense value in building friendships and getting to know each other personally and as artists. To some, this sense of community was just as vital as the work itself. Connections were made through mealtime exchanges, “after-dinner dance rituals,” and time spent collectively in a unique rural place (<http://wassaicartistresidency.org/>). The importance of relationship building is also strongly reinforced by the Wassaic Project founders.

Along with nurturing community within the residency, artists are encouraged to explore and involve themselves in the hamlet. All artists are invited to participate in monthly artist talks and presentations, and are required to be available for open-studios, increasing transparency and connection. Some residents receive Education Fellowships, awarded for outstanding teaching experience, and serve as teaching artists with Wassaic Project education programs. Lastly, residents are given top priority for the summer exhibition (<http://wassaicartistresidency.org/>).

### **Other Program and Project Strategies**

The Wassaic Project organizes a wide array of programs around music, art, dance and film. They attract a spectrum of participants from locals to urban “weekenders,” and organize projects and programs that respond to both, while maintaining conceptual creative integrity:

The way that we curate the exhibition is in the [same] way that we think about the library. We want to make sure there is something for everybody. So for those who are just getting involved in art, maybe the art that we have on the first floor is more visually engaging and less conceptually complex. Or if it conceptually engaging, it also has a “wow” visual component that works really well to get people excited and talking about work. We also train all of our staff to really be able to have conversations with people about art... and most people leave thinking, “you know, we made it to the top and there’s something really cool up there. I really enjoyed this” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

You start asking questions and you have a conversation, and if at the end, they still think the exhibition is bullshit, that’s totally fine. No big deal. They’ve had the conversation, which is the most interesting part (E. Biddle, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

Stimulating curiosity and thinking about accessibility and diversity within the space has encouraged greater involvement. Overall, experimental practice in Wassaic has largely been well received. “People have a far more open mind when they are able to engage directly with an artist,” Barnett-Winsby explained.

It's rare that you get to be involved in facilitating someone's experience of something that's completely new to them. And it's not a didactic situation where we know better, it's a facilitating moment where we're trying to create interesting, new, dynamic creative events within the community that all people can access and hopefully walk away from a little bit more enriched (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

Barnett-Winsby explained that "there is a freedom [in the rural] that doesn't exist in other spaces more densely populated." They are not restricted by space or the need to secure permits that would otherwise make facilitating ambitious or experimental projects nearly impossible.

People just keep saying "yes." Things are possible that aren't possible in these other spaces, and one of the reasons that Wassaic has worked that way it has, is that no one was paying attention to this town. People had written it off... If we had tried to do this project in the parent town of Amenia, we would have found opposition everywhere (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016).

The residency and exhibitions build creative capital within the community. Exhibitions are mostly fed by the work of resident artists, but they also present work by other emerging artists through multiple exhibitions in 8,000 square feet of exhibition space, plenty of room for experimentation. They host visiting artist lectures at the town bar, and through a Guest Curator Program, they provide opportunities for emerging curators share creative visions (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). The work is not produced within a vacuum, but relates to the aesthetics of the specific place and its rural surroundings (Meier, 2012).

In an effort to expand involvement and deepen engagement with the community, the Wassaic Project organizes Last Saturdays each month. This programming series begins with a spring Community Day Block Party and parade, and ends in the fall with transformation of the Mill into an artist-made haunted house and celebration that include hay rides and hands-on farm activities. Open Studios are a regular component of Last Saturdays, inviting the public to tour Luther Barn and talk with artists in their studios. Community Day raises funds for the fire department and celebrates the town through a block party, Wassaic Time Capsule Ceremony,

field games, a parade of artist-made floats, and a cakewalk accompanied by “an exuberant 19-piece brass band,” ending the day with music at the local bar (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). Other community-based programming includes a Summer Benefit and Preview Party, and the Annual Mill Warming party “to celebrate the winterization of Maxon Mill” and initiate their calendar of events, which features food, music, children’s activities, workshops with resident artists, and the current exhibition (<http://wassaicproject.org/>).

As the Wassaic Project has invested in the community, they have increased emphasis on education and outreach, serving as a center not only for multidisciplinary contemporary art and experimentation, but for continued learning. Through summer programs and school-year partnerships, they connect resident artists and creative resources to the surrounding area and provide opportunities for youth who may not otherwise have access to art learning experiences. Wassaic Project’s Art Nest provides free space where “kids of all ages can do individual and collaborative art projects, build creatives kills, and engage with contemporary art” year round (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). Projects are diverse in media and inspired by current resident artists, ranging from floats for community day to book making and textiles.

A diverse range of programs are hosted in schools throughout the county and led by Wassaic Project staff, resident artists, and Education Fellows. Artists visit classes to share their work, facilitate projects and explore ideas central to contemporary art, which have included such things as stop-motion animation, motivational (or subversive) posters, and performance art. In-school workshops, after school classes and clubs engage participants in hands-on contemporary art projects and bring students, staff and artists together to work on the Haunted Mill and Community Day Parade. Field trips to the Wassaic Project involve students through tours and projects (<http://wassaicproject.org/>).



Summer programs provide opportunities for younger audiences to investigate contemporary art in fun and interactive ways that explore a multiplicity of mediums. The Art Scouts program involves youth in an artist-led and interactive experience inspired by the summer exhibition. Participants connect with the work through observation, conversation, and activities that culminate in a mini-exhibition and reception. Those who participate in Camp Wassaic experience a variety of creative processes and collaborate with resident artists on a collaborative art installation. Two printmaking camps provide opportunities for participants of all ages to learn about contemporary printmaking.

The founding program of the Wassaic Project, a free multidisciplinary contemporary arts festival that occurs each August, is a unique weekend-long participatory experience that celebrates a diverse range of contemporary art “of the highest level” (<http://wassaicproject.org/>). Over time, the festival has become an immense source of pride for Wassaic and a stimulus for social and cultural capital. Attendees experience visual art, film, and performance, come together over food, participate in diverse educational programs, and an array of special activities and events that include such things as bonfires, artist happy hours, and workshops. The Wassaic Volunteer Fire Department organizes a performative pancake breakfast, and a food court is assembled at The Lantern, the local bar and pizza restaurant owned and operated by Wassaic Project founders. The festival operates outside the confines of conventional art spaces, connects directly to the local community of Wassaic, and focuses on site-sensitive installations and performances. “Artists and performers of all mediums come together [to] exchange ideas, learn new things, and engage in a thriving community” (<http://wassaicproject.org/>).

## CHAPTER SIX

### CASE STUDY: COLEMAN CENTER FOR THE ARTS, YORK, AL

The Coleman Center for the Arts was founded in 1985 in York, Alabama (population 2,800) by native “Tut” Altman Riddick. Tut grew up with a deep love for the town, and when she left to Penland, NC to take classes at a craft school there, she began envisioning a dream that York would have something similar to Penland. She hoped that artists might serve a role to bring about social transformation, an idea that continues as the heart of the Coleman Center:

While the Coleman Center started with probably a more traditional interpretation of art than we work with now, for the most part, the idea that art was a catalyst for social and economic change was always at the heart of the organization (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Through her travels, Tut met artists who she would invite to York, and thus the town consistently maintained a presence of contemporary artists living in the community that contributed to the identity and evolution of the organization (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Directors Richard Saxton, who later founded the M12 Collective, and Amy Horst, developed the organizational infrastructure and the permanent, community-based artist-in-residence program. Continuing the tradition of connectivity and relationship building, Saxton

invited current Directors, Shana Berger and Nathan Purath, as visiting artists approximately eleven years ago, who fell in love with York and took on the responsibility of managing the organization (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). The present staff of five includes two Co-Directors, a Curator of Education, Facilities Manager, and the One Mile Garden Program Director.

### **Philosophy and Purpose**

“The Coleman Center for the Arts (CCA) is a contemporary arts organization that empowers art to foster positive social change, answer civic needs, build local pride, and use creativity for community problem solving.” Their mission is “to integrate contemporary art into education, civic life, and community development throughout [the] region” (<http://colemanarts.org/>).

The arts serve a special purpose in York to improve a rural community that has struggled economically. The Coleman Center has worked to enable artists in a creative solving capacity to help York sustain itself, even though, as Berger mentioned, “it’s frequently not easy to sustain a small contemporary art nonprofit anywhere, but especially in rural places that struggle with economic and other issues” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). The foundation of the organization rests on the foundation of art as a catalyst for social change, education, and community development, and its endlessly varied projects and programs address this philosophy in different ways through community organizing (Scoville, 2014).

The Coleman Center invites artists to explore issues inflicting the local community, but also to explore rural context in a more general way. Berger emphasized that, while all places have special value, more artists should experience the country, and the important histories, stories and values invested in rural America that have much to offer the identity of the collective

nation. “Much of rural Alabama played such an important role in the civil rights movement,” she explained. “It’s a part of America that is responsible for really shaping the history of the country.” The rural agricultural tradition is the backbone of America. “If you go a couple of generations back,” said Berger, “most people are from rural places” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Berger hopes that the Coleman Center can contribute real benefit, including economic advantage, to the people who live in York (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). The combination of a community-based organization, involved citizens, and the creative ingenuity of visiting artists makes for a great partnership in addressing complex local problems that lack easy solutions:

The community of artists, and certainly the small town that we work in, are both generative spaces that have a lot to offer in terms of exciting solutions, ideas and outcomes for the world that we're living in now (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

This community development approach means it is essential for the organization to be responsive to the civic and social needs of the community. It also explains the unique projects and programs that emanate from the Coleman Center, influenced by the particular place, specific artists, and adaptive to momentary local conditions. Through its artist-organized projects, the organization flexes and bows with the gradual evolution of the place. The social fabric of the community becomes the context within which the collaborative, creative projects are situated (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

The projects that develop from the Coleman Center are a convergence of contemporary art and consensus based organizing. Ranging from “conceptual and performative to object based and functional,” the projects don’t have a standard structure and form nor do they subscribe to

any strict discipline. Some projects are more community-based while others, such as those in the gallery, are presented more traditionally (<http://colemanarts.org/>).

The Coleman Center's relationship with the community of York is the starting point at which project ideas originate, deriving from contemporary issues locally relevant and prevalent. As part of the community, the organization is involved as a collaborator in each project, acting as a conduit and facilitator during the process (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). CCA staff and artists maintain an effort to be involved in community happenings and establish genuine but informal relationships with people in the area. "We're not holding symposiums and surveying people about what they care about. It just comes out of real relationships" (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). CCA has developed a deep understanding of the values inherent in the place and of interest to the people of York, and therefore looks for artists who are able to interact within and contribute to that context. The synergy between artist and community is of utmost importance, and if that is achieved, then the rest seems to follow.

The resident artists contribute new ideas, fresh perspectives and a creative energy that encourages experimentation. "They want to try things that are new, and different, and exciting," said Berger. "Even given their different perspectives and life experiences, their interests were a great common ground for sort of mutual inquiry and project development" (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). It seems that York is a great place to experiment, and people are generally willing to take personal risks, try new things, and overcome areas of difference within the context surrounding the CCA projects. Berger explained that "some have the idea that people in rural areas are traditional, and wouldn't be open to avant-garde art practices," but in her experience, "as long as the meaning is real, and accessible, they're pretty much hip to do

things that are totally a little crazy, weird, and avant-garde” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

To do this work in a way that is sincerely responsive requires the Coleman Center to facilitate partnerships within the community, offering artists and community members opportunities to work together through projects, and encouraging mutuality, collaboration and reciprocity between co-participants (<http://colemanarts.org/>). Berger explained that they “don't see the community and their involvement as something separate from the projects that are developed and implemented” because it is all part of the process inherent in the work (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). “By sustaining long term relationships between artists, participants, and community, the CCA seeks to have a lasting effect on individuals, issues, and the means of production for contemporary art” (<http://colemanarts.org/>).

All participants are directly and collaboratively involved in the process of each project, which “breaks down typical boundaries between artist, subject, object and audience” (<http://colemanarts.org/>). While each project is developed individually, CCA works to ensure that participants sustain connections to each other and the work. Berger emphasized the intimate, personal nature of their process. It is reliant on face-to-face connection, and personal communication, and is “a very person-by-person, high touch kind of message,” she explained (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

But this sort of collaborative community work, especially in rural place, can be challenging simply due to the complexities of people and personalities. Berger explained the difficulties in “striving for genuine collaboration between so many people who are unique and different,” and that trying to “operate on a consensus model” is not an easy way to work. According to Berger, locals in small towns are often very invested in their communities and have

a certain sense of authorship, “in a way that is really creative and beautiful,” but that can also result in a sort of protectiveness of that authorship. “I find the community here to be really easy to work with, but I just think it’s hard to create things. I love the process, but it’s obviously an involved way of working” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Not only are there difficulties in navigating personalities and facilitating collaborations, but the nature of a small town is that everyone is under-resourced and over-involved, with the same people doing everything. Berger explained that this can compound and affect everyone, and is even apparent in their education programs. Due to lack of population, students in rural schools are expected to be involved in most everything, which can pose a challenge when asking for their time or involvement in the arts. “Even if they really want to do something,” said Berger, “there is just a lot of pressure on them to do a lot of other things. So the art program just doesn’t rank” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

### **The Artist Residency Program**

Operating within a more collaborative format, the Coleman Center’s community-based “residency” or “visiting artist” program commissions artists who work together with the Center and the community to execute socially-based, participatory public art projects.

The process for developing projects evolved at the same time that they moved and began generating social capital within York, which helped to ground their efforts in the specific place. Their work was informed through the process of continually organizing projects, discovering those that were most successful, as well as what ways of working were best for the artist and for the community. “We were trying to formalize what we had the most success with into a

methodology that we could use for every project,” said Berger (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Rather than accepting applications, the majority of the projects and exhibitions are curated. CCA is willing to consider requests only if artists feel they are a strong fit and have a specific desire to work in York, although this is not a common occurrence. The Coleman Center continually keeps an eye open for potential artists, looking closely at past projects to consider how similar ventures of the same spirit would fit in York, and those invitations are extended on a case-by-case basis. They seek creative people who are likely to share a synergy with the community, who will be interested in relevant local issues, or who might have the right x-factor. “It’s personal,” says Berger, “it’s about the people and relationships that make up the Coleman Center” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). While not an exact science, CCA does the best that it can, but sometimes artists come and it just doesn’t work:

Sometimes artists don’t like working in the community, or they don’t like the degree to which we have a socially engaged practice. They might not like working with commissioners who are so heavily involved in the process... It is a really involved way of working and it’s definitely not for everybody. Sometimes things just naturally don’t move forward (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Following the selection of artists, CCA initiates preliminary conversations, and extends an invitation to York for a three to ten-day visit before diving in to project development:

We noticed pretty early on that people happen to have a lot of preconceptions about rural Alabama, and it really wasn’t fair to the artists or community members to try and come up with projects that hadn’t been developed from a genuine sense of knowing, interaction and lived experience... It’s a pretty specific context, so to try and create work for that context that you’ve never really experienced, it just really isn’t fair to anybody who is involved, and so being here becomes a really important part of [the process] (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).



During preliminary conversations, CCA staff work with artists to plan a small event during their initial visit to York, such as an “artist talk, movie screening, educational workshop, or themed dinner party” (<http://colemanarts.org/>). The visit provides a time to introduce the artists and the community to one another. The project proposals generally begin very open-ended, but start to develop in a collaborative process with community exposure and feedback.

Project development and implementation is lengthy, usually occurring over a two to six-year period. “We’ve noticed that the projects developed over a longer period of time, and that are actually developed in York, rather than being conceived elsewhere, are much stronger projects” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). Some projects may continue indefinitely with artists returning over the course of several years (<http://colemanarts.org/>). As a result of longer stays or repeated visits, the CCA and the York community build a close relationship and “sense of knowing” with these artists. Many individuals that work with the CCA stay connected with the organization or with others in the community, even after their work with the Coleman Center has ended (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

The relationships between artists and locals vary with each individual, but “the more they get to know the community, the more people see them as who they are, and they are freer to go out and get to know people on their own, maintaining those relationships independent of the Coleman Center,” said Berger. “Without the Coleman center here, artists wouldn’t probably be able to just roll into town and work with the community without some kind of format and platform” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). In this way, the Coleman Center acts as a conduit or agent through which outside artists can be involved inside the community. It appears that the sense of trust stewarded to the CCA by the community may be transferred to the artists by association, allowing them to form their own relationships with the people of York.

The relationship to the CCA also endows artists with a community understanding that they would not have otherwise:

I hope what we give to artists is this sense that every one of them can come in to the community and feel like they have a sense of knowing because of their relationship with the Coleman Center... I hope that we can lend a kind of 'permission to be known,' and use that for real explorative freedom (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).

Berger referred to a quote by artist Suzanne Lacy to illustrate the freedom permitted through being "known" in a small town. The following paragraphs are pulled from an interview conducted with Lacy after she had participated in a multi-year, multi-site community art project with Appalshop, a regional community arts center in Whitesburg, Kentucky that gives voice to people living in Appalachia and rural America:

The seeds of boundary breaking, form creation, on a populist level are to be found in idiosyncrasies. People in a small town often embrace their idiosyncrasies. They're idiosyncratic people. "That's Larry. He's the one that does that. He's crazy but we've known him all his life and so it's ok. He can be crazy with us." There's a lot of flexibility in a small town for idiosyncrasies, bizarre behavior, as long as you are known. Wherever that is possible so is breaking expectations of art (Paget-Clark, 2000, para. 18).

When I was a kid in the San Joaquin Valley of California, I was Larry's daughter and if I wanted to do something weird in directing the school play or decorating for the school prom, people went along with it. "Well that's what Larry's daughter does." Here in Elkhorn City, we found a great tolerance for our ideas, but we also felt like we were "known." Accepted into the community and regarded with curiosity, quickly assigned the privilege of "that's what they do; they are artists." We became in a remarkably short time, known, or at least accepted quantities, and I predict because of this there would be a great deal of latitude here about what we could do as artists (Paget-Clark, 2000, para. 18).

## **Other Program and Project Strategies**

In addition to the residency program, the Coleman Center for the Arts organizes exhibitions featuring work by local artists as well as regional and national artists completing CCA projects (<http://colemanarts.org/>).

They organize a robust, year-round youth education program in schools throughout the county that offers in-school and after-school programming. The after-school program for high school students takes after their residency model. Students are asked to “define the values and issues that they care about and then design a project around those issues” that has both civic and symbolic significance (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). They don’t necessarily spend much time debating about how the projects are defined as “art,” but look at parallels with similar exciting projects around the country.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CASE STUDY: GRIN CITY COLLECTIVE, GRINNELL, IA

For ten years the Grin City Collective has inhabited a 320-acre family farm in central Iowa, a mile north of Grinnell, Iowa (population 9,050). The Grin City Collective, then the Grinnell Artist Residency, was founded in 2006 by Joe Lacina, whose great-grandfather purchased the farm in 1928. The farm is privately owned but all its buildings are open to resident artists, and it maintains a rich history, including the addition of the tofu factory which moved to a larger facility in 2003, leaving the factory to be transformed into an arts habitat (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/>).

The Grinnell Artist Residency had informal beginnings as a summer residency for emerging artists, originating from the interest of Lacina to bring peers from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) to the family farm to make work together for four weeks and organize a show. This first iteration of a residency evolved into a Summer Emerging Artist program, only open to college students, which focused on providing young, emerging artists the time and space to make work at the farm (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

In 2011, the Grinnell Artist Residency hired Co-Director Molly Rideout to expand the program to a longer six-month format open to artists of all career stages, and broadened to include writers. While Rideout did accomplish these goals, she recognized that something was missing. “Artists came and left, and while during their stay they accomplished much for their personal development, the program lacked relevance to the community in which it sat. Most of the town of Grinnell didn't even know the residency existed, and nothing of what went on in the studios” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/history.html>, May 5, 2016). While expanding the program and thinking about financial sustainability, they realized that “in a community such as ours, a retreat based residency was not financially viable. The community was not interested in supporting artists from other places who were then going to go back to those other places, and likewise, national funders were not at the level that we were working at” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Their removed location limited the types of sponsorships available, as “national funders were not interested in funding a program that wasn't in an area where their employees worked” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Locally, the majority of potential backers were agricultural industries who “typically have funding priorities focused on agriculture and education,” said Rideout. On top of that, small, agricultural communities often have a limited pool of potential donors, and while these prospects may be land rich, they are not typically high-wealth, particularly in terms of expendable income. Grin City has worked with their community to explore other types of gifts, such as grain or corn that can then be sold at the co-op (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Beyond the difficulties of funding a rural residency program, the co-directors were much more interested in a collaborative practice with the visiting artists that could have greater impact within the community. Together these ideas were the catalyst for rebranding the residency as

Grin City Collective. The word “collective” was carefully chosen to embody the collaborative element that, moving forward, would enable them to work closely not only with artists but with the greater community. The process was slow at first as the collective determined how to integrate a community outreach component in addition to the residency, and explored avenues for building a more socially-based organization. “At that point it really was community outreach as opposed to community arts projects,” said Rideout. “We had these artists coming in and then going out into the community, and the artists saw themselves as outreach because they weren’t part of that community” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Eventually this explorative process led to the more current focus on community-based projects more deeply rooted in specific place. Through the most recent iteration of the residency program, Grin City has offered artists the opportunity to participate in a variety of community-focused arts initiatives. Grin City continues this transformative process, now facing its most dramatic change yet. They are moving off of the farm to become a flexible, nomadic entity focused on organizing artists and creative thinkers for socially-based projects across a wider geography in Iowa.

### **Philosophy and Purpose**

Grin City Collective is “a project space and artist residency on a working farm, [that] fosters interdisciplinary collaboration among artists and makers of all sorts and engages in public programming for diverse audiences” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/about.html>, May 5, 2016). While maintaining their founding mission to support emerging artists, Grin City works towards community enrichment and sustainability, engaged in the betterment of and sharing with their Iowa community through the arts. They do this through active community engagement and through a philosophy of art as social practice, which results in a wide range of artist-led socially-

based projects throughout central Iowa. “In an effort to counteract the closed system of art reacting to art reacting to art, Grin City provides social context for artists and their work by restructuring the old ‘retreat’ residency into one that focuses on active community engagement and volunteer work” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/history.html>, May 5, 2016).

Grin City is highly collaborative and provides a supportive working atmosphere for artists. The most essential part of their work is connecting and building relations with the place and people. “We have found that the most successful projects are very closely tied to the community in some way,” said Rideout. This requires a process of knowing and understanding, creating investment, forming genuine relationships, and developing projects that derive directly from those relationships. They must be place specific, in contrast to “plop-art,” as Rideout described, which exemplifies art that can exist anywhere. Community members are involved in the process as well, taking part in the planning stages and implementation.

The process begins by initiating conversation, generating awareness, and securing investment and stewardship. “It’s making sure that we’re talking to the community,” said Rideout, “and figuring out what is of interest to them” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). A significant amount of time is spent communicating about projects, spreading the message and nurturing interest. In a small community, activities must generate broad awareness for the public to feel that they have ownership and are included. Rideout expressed the importance of continuously clear communication with as many people as possible, even to the point of redundancy, when engaging in work that is so involved and community dependent. Complications and misunderstanding can easily arise when many stakeholders are involved but not connected to the work in the same way. She expressed difficulties working with city council who, after approving a public art project, its location and budget, began questioning the project

in its entirety, uncomfortable choosing the artist or artwork, while simultaneously requiring approval of the artist. It was a lesson in ensuring that all those involved are on the same page, and that they remain there together.

Relatability and relevancy were also communicated as essential considerations during project coordination. This demands an understanding of audience and connecting the work in a way that is relatable to those who may not have a history participating in traditional contemporary art galleries or museums, and therefore do not respond to that particular context:

The failure there is when a “big city artist” keeps making their “big city art” and then presents it to an audience that does not connect... “City artists” come to Iowa and realize that their art is not relevant to this community, because there is this “art world” thing where you just make art that reacts to other art, which becomes really insular, and you can't have that in a rural community. You have to be connected to your neighbors (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

It is not uncommon to hear the phrase “exposing communities to art,” particularly in rural communities that may be seen as in need of “exposure” to culture, as if culture is something that does not already exist there. Rideout commented that this idea of exposure lacks consent and reciprocal understanding. Rather than talking about exposure, “we just need to have a conversation about how the community defines art,” and how that is in relation to what the artists are doing and their definitions of art (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Rural communities and their residents engage in a multiplicity of ventures that they do not necessarily perceive as art. “Every small town has some type of historical society, and the way that information is gathered and presented, that’s a lot of what contemporary artists are doing” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Part of Grin City’s capability rests in helping the community reframe what they think of as art and how it may be defined, broadening their relationship to ideas around contemporary art in relation to their own context.



Grin City has experienced a gradual learning process of its own, and in some ways is still maneuvering, learning firsthand the difficulties inherent in trying to do work “for” rather than “with” the community. They did at first operate within the “exposure” model, within a small community that was assumed to not have other art resources. It seems that it was through making mistakes and learning from those efforts that they found their way:

We did a pop-up show in a town called Brooklyn, Iowa... and it was a bunch of contemporary artists just doing their work. It was weird work, which is not the entry level that you want for a community that isn't used to contemporary art, and so it kind of put them off... They have so many other things vying for their time that it's not worth it to them (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Grin City works toward integration, and a collaborative, mutual process that serves more as an exchange, with both artist and community informing each other. As much as the community has potential to learn from the artists, those artists learn equally as much. As Rideout explained, the artists do not provide a service, and the community does not need it. But instead, the relationship is more symbiotic. Grin City works to break down barriers between the community and artists, and does so through a process of introduction and involvement. The artists engage at the community level, and are encouraged to immerse themselves in experiences intimately connected to local culture to gain a more holistic understanding of the place. Such experiences might include participating in a chicken processing day, or touring the Monsanto seed corn producing factory, one of the largest in the country. This involvement lends insight into distinctly local perspectives that can only be gained through experience.

Outside assumptions are easily constructed and projected, so it is vital for visiting artists to be consciously sensitive to internal perspectives. A closer look reveals that the realities are complex and multi-dimensional, and while some practices embedded in rural, agricultural regions might be controversial in another context, they are essential to the livelihood of local

residents. Therefore, it is important for visiting artists to have understanding of context, or spend time experiencing, listening and learning. The intention is to arrive at a project that is situated at the center of where interests of community and artist overlap, where both entities find fulfillment in the process and value in each other.

An exemplary model of community-centric execution, according to Rideout, was Grin City's Public Writing, Public Libraries project. The project was developed by Co-Director Molly Rideout and executed collaboratively with visiting artists, and involved writers composing works of fiction, nonfiction or poetry that were installed in library windows around Iowa. Each artist took a different approach to how they worked with the 13 libraries participating in the project. As administrator, Rideout first went to the effort of meeting in person with each of the librarians across the state, and consistently communicated with them throughout the process to ensure they felt connected and valued. Writers were paired with communities based on specific interests or qualities that facilitated connection or relatability in some way. For instance, a writer who identified as a second generation Indian-American was paired with a community that had a particularly high immigrant population. The writer spent a full day in the libraries where she was installing, interviewing the librarians, who coordinated various groups to meet with her, and she took the time to have conversations with anyone else who came in the door. As a result, the poem she authored is layered with meaning and laden with specific connections to that community, in such a way that locals are able to gather more in-depth meaning from the poem than could an outsider (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Part of Grin City's purpose is to "foster radical and innovative approaches to creative thinking and art making," and the collective brings together thinkers and makers of all

disciplines to do this work in a socially committed way. Rideout commented on the nature of rural places and spaces to foster experimentation in the arts:

Rural places are ideal for experimentation... when artists come out here, they love the physical space and physical openness, and they find it opens their brain in terms of what is possible. They're not confined to whatever their studio is in Brooklyn. They have a giant barn with twenty foot doors (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

And people are weird, and they are understanding of weird people... everyone in this town has some weird quirk that we all know... and so I think there's really that freedom to be able to kind of take risks (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Rideout discussed how, once the community gets to know someone, they invest in that person on an individual level and in a significant way. Interactions between artists and community develop connections over time, building relationships that can sustain beyond a singular residency. Once artists become known, these connections might also create welcome space for experimentation. She expressed that it can be beneficial to sometimes provide opportunities in rural place that encourage people to explore new territory outside their comfort “because those opportunities are not as prevalent” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Not only that, but providing new opportunities to do something enjoyable and experiential is in the interest of both the collective and surrounding communities:

We throw costume dance parties, because we want to dress up and dance to music... I think that there's that aspect of being able to do whatever you want, and the community welcomes all of these opportunities so that they can go participate in it too (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

### **The Artist Residency and Collective**

The Grin City Collective hosts over forty visual and performing artists, and writers each year through the residency program from all over the country and some internationally. The

residency operates April to October, with up to ten people working at the farm at any point in time and staying for blocks of either three or six weeks (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/>).

Like most residencies, artists are provided housing and the “creative time and space” to work on the farm, but are also expected to participate in a weekly potluck, contribute to cleaning, and work one day in the garden for each three-week block to learn about the land on which they temporarily live. According to their website, “life at a collective is a lot what it sounds like, with a lot of collaborative work and social time, and everyone is expected to pitch in” ([http://www.grincitycollective.org/Residency\\_Guidelines\\_2016.pdf](http://www.grincitycollective.org/Residency_Guidelines_2016.pdf), May 5, 2016).

Grin City seeks artists interested in rural America and local agriculture and “who wish to share their creative work with the community” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/regular.html>, May 5, 2016). They often look for artists with specific interests related to a particular project. Some require specialized skills such as writing or woodworking, and other projects, such as pop-up galleries, are open invitation. Grin City also considers quality of work and ability of the artist to work well in a collaborative climate. Moving forward into the next phase of the organization, as Grin City transitions away from the individual residency and into an entirely project-based model, artist selection will appear similar to professional hiring, focusing on specific skills, competencies, and character necessary for a particular project.

Until recently, the residency has worked through various optional outreach programs to involve artists at the farm and in surrounding communities. Artists may apply for the Farm/Garden Outreach Program, the Grinnell Public Art Initiative, and Social Practice Projects. They might also elect not to do any outreach, which is slightly costlier than other options, therefore encouraging artists to be more involved during their stay.

Through the Farm/Garden Outreach Program, artists can choose to invest more of their creative energy on the farm. A collaboration with Grin City's Middle Way Farm provides artists interested in agriculture the opportunity to immerse themselves in farm operations for 12-15 hours each week. Artists enjoy access to fresh produce and "learn the ins and outs of small-scale, commercial vegetable growing" which provides "numerous opportunities for education and discovery both in and out of the field" (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/regular.html>, May 5, 2016). The two-acre garden contributes to the wellbeing of the greater community as a source of organic, fresh food, while educating the public about healthy eating and "building a vibrant community-based food system" (<http://www.middlewayfarm.com/new-page-1/>, May 5, 2016). The farm connects artists to cycles of the land, and emphasizes reliance on local systems, further embedding artists in the local landscape during their time in Grinnell.

Reflecting Grin City's philosophy of social practice, the Social Practice Projects are a fundamental component of Grin City's work, during which artists may work collaboratively with Grin City staff on social practice and public art projects within local communities. The residency and social practice components of Grin City, while viewed as separate by the organization, are connected through the involvement of visiting artists. Some projects are initiated individually or collaboratively by resident artists, but most are organized by the organization, who distributes a call specific to each initiative. This call for artists describes the project, potential collaborators and participants, necessary skills, and suggestions of what to expect. Selected artists work collaboratively for approximately twelve hours per week on a single project during the entirety of a three-week residency block. According to Rideout, the projects require "working very substantially with a community somewhere within driving distance, usually about an hour radius" (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Social Practice Projects have

culminated in an unbounded array of structures and forms including, but certainly not limited to, site-specific installations, public art, pop-up galleries, archives, inventions and experiments, books, dinners, murals, dance parties, workshops, and regional collaborative initiatives such as Public Writing, Public Libraries. Grin City's efforts have also stimulated the growth of unintentional creative projects throughout the area:

Thanks to its expanding residency program, Grin City has also attracted a cohort of creative minds within the local community. Year-round this group experiments with the intersection of contemporary art, maker-culture and rural living. The results of their work can be found throughout town: in the Grinnell Art Gallery, at the farmer's market, Relish restaurant, and Grinnell College (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/about.html>, May 5, 2016).

### **Other Program and Project Strategies**

Grin City Collective sustains other distinct programs that still connect to the residency. They organize weekly Skill Shares on such topics as letterpress, fermentation, wild edibles, mixology, how to make hardtack, cheese-making, knife skills, and making fire. Competitive yard games are a common occurrence, and every Friday boasts a potluck and open studios.

The Llenirg Gallery is a "rigorously inclusive" and cooperative exhibition space run by residents, alumni and staff that features work by artists of all levels and disciplines. Also located on the farm, the gallery is marked by a "collaborative, do-it-yourself ethic," and its members "actively pursue community outreach through ongoing projects, workshops and performances" (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/jgallery.html>, May 5, 2016).

The most publicly involved event is the annual Rurally Good Festival, a one-day open house and celebration of the multiplicity of arts disciplines and Grin City resident artists. Visitors explore the farm, visit with artists in the studios, and learn about ongoing projects. They participate in a variety of activities for all ages, including live music, outdoor sculptures,

interactive art activities, classes, art galleries, film screenings, poetry readings, an immersive site-specific installation, as well as the late night dance party, bonfire and over-night camping. The festival offers an inviting atmosphere for all to experience the farm in all of its creative wonder and explore contemporary art through highly engaging, enjoyable, and relevant activities (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/rgabout.html>, May 5, 2016).

### **The Next Chapter of Grin City Collective**

Grin City is presently undergoing a major transformation to “strengthen and expand its community-activating creative work with the new focus of executing place-based art projects in towns throughout Iowa and beyond” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/aboutgcc.html>, May 5, 2016). This shift advances the progression away from a retreat model, toward the community-based projects for which Grin City is known. The collective will “continue its mission of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration among artists and makers of all sorts and engaging in public programming for diverse audiences” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/aboutgcc.html>, May 5, 2016). They will be able to direct greater energy towards community-based projects and initiatives to magnify impact across a larger geographic area. Rather than artists paying residency fees, Grin City will pay artists from funds previously used to maintain facilities. Co-director, and soon to be Executive Director, Molly Rideout commented that the transition not only eases funding challenges, but emphasizes the work about which they are most passionate:

The community and social practice aspect of our programming is really where we are excited, and it's where the community was excited. They were not interested in supporting artists working on their own practice, getting a little taste of Iowa and then going home. They were excited about projects that had a substantial impact on their community, and I think this is true with funders, kind of across the board in the arts, not just with artist residencies. They want to see a very specific outcome. And with an artist residency, it's like investing in education... You are investing in an artist not really

knowing how it's going to affect them, and if it does, it's hard to put that into concrete terms for the funder. It is generally difficult to fundraise for them, especially in a rural area (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

The collective will no longer reside on the farm, and artists will no longer be coming to focus on their own work, but will engage with a specific collaborative project. As a connected and knowledgeable presence in central Iowa, Grin City will still serve the role of developing socially-based projects and then inviting artists to participate, and may eventually re-institute a traveling residency program. They will work closely with those who are interested in developing initiatives with the collective, working together to determine the nature of the projects, requirements of involved artists, and finding housing for artists within the community itself. Grin City will be positioned to act as an influential source of creative connectivity in the region, relying even more on a network of partners and collaborators. According to Rideout, the length and nature of projects will vary depending on intentions, from short, one-day events, to “extended projects with multiple site visits,” or even settling in one location for lengthier and more involved initiatives (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). The organizations will no longer be dependent on a limiting residency structure defined by three-week blocks of time, and service to the individual focus of artists. And increased artist support suggests higher expectations in terms of preparation and level of engagement.

Rideout discussed how the residency structure can demand significant time and energy from a small number of involved staff who would prefer to be engaged with the projects rather than maintaining facilities and the administration of the residency program:

When it's a small staff... you end up spending most of your time cleaning bedrooms and doing plumbing, which is not of interest to us. We want to be doing those projects and making a substantial impact, and we want to be a part of the art-making process, whereas with the residency, it's really a service industry... kind of a fancy artist-version of a hotel (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).



The new direction will focus on a few primary goals that have increased in prominence with the transition. Grin City has always believed that communication builds community, and art encourages understanding, but with greater emphasis on socially-based projects, shared experience will become central to their identity. As the “mouthpieces of culture,” artists should be informed by “rural lifestyles and rural communities so that they are able to incorporate those points of view and those lived experiences into their work,” to interpret and outwardly communicate about them (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). These narratives will be directed inward within the community, but also projected outward. They will provide increased opportunities to bring people together, create spaces for shared experience, in the end contributing to creative placemaking, but as Rideout described, “placemaking without physicality” (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). The name of Grin City has always alluded to community or a networked city-structure. With the transition, they are moving from “community” defined by physicality and permanence to one defined by flexibility and temporality, allowing engagement with constituencies that may not be identified as place-based.

Grin City is in the process of determining potential projects and partners, being sure to remain cognizant of the intersecting interests of both community and artists. Established limitations for the first few years will ease transitions as they explore this new programming strategy. Grin City will only be working in communities where they have an established relationship and engaging artists with whom they have already collaborated. The processes for inviting and selecting artists are still in development, but they will likely rely on a team of artists for each project, true to the nature of a collective creative network. The Grin City Collective will officially set course in this new direction in 2017. While their projects will vary in location, the organization will maintain its connection to the town of Grinnell.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CASE STUDY: M12 COLLECTIVE, BYERS, CO

The M12 Collective is an “interdisciplinary group based in Colorado that creates context-based art works, research projects, and education initiatives” to explore “the aesthetics of rural cultures and landscapes” through a fusion of “creative practice, cultural institutionalality, and education” (<http://m12studio.org/about>, May 3, 2016). The collective is currently organized and operated by a cooperative group of fourteen people, and recognizes thirteen additional former collaborators and affiliated advisors. M12 is recognized both nationally and internationally for their groundbreaking collaborative and interdisciplinary projects.

When the collective originated in the early 2000s, there was not a recognizable rural arts field, and there was especially little interest or connection to a contemporary art practice. The world of contemporary art was perceived as not existing in rural spaces, but instead amidst urban art fairs and museums. There was some lineage from which to build: “the Hudson River School of Painters, or the Regionalists, or indigenous forms of art where the folk and vernacular is imbedded with everyday life,” but “in terms of a viable rural contemporary art practice... that

didn't really exist." The group and their work was mostly met with apathy and disinterest from the larger contemporary art world (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

As Saxton explained, the most daunting challenge they have faced, and "part of the process of making the work," has been "opening up a new field" (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Potential audiences were small at first and few people were engaged with what they were doing. "A big challenge is trying to articulate why it's important," he explained, "and why other people should be interested" (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). It seems that much of the initial work revolved around trying to build a support structure where one had not previously existed.

Saxton, who grew up in the country, found himself returning to a deeply entrenched interest in the rural. He explained how he struggled to find his way during his university studies, but that it "was eventually through art-making" that his passion was revealed. The academic art environment was not conducive to exploration of the rural, and while Saxton searched for a creative practice in line with his interests, he was unable to find it in academia nor in "the larger world of contemporary art" (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

During his final year of graduate education at Indiana University, Saxton was awarded a fellowship to join the Rural Studio, an architecture program at Auburn University. An important part of his graduate experience, it was the first time he encountered a "synthetic and supportive" learning structure. Soon after, Saxton began piecing together a network of national and international creative professionals, discovering colleagues around the world, and traveling to expand this web and further his knowledge of the rural. The initial interest was in looking at rural public space and how it functioned outside of an urban context, and as Saxton explained, there was not much existing work or resources devoted to such (R. Saxton, personal communication,

April 19, 2016). The formulation of a network, propelled by interest in creative practice in the rural, prompted the informal and organic development of a group that practiced under the moniker of municipalWORKSHOP. The predecessor to M12, this collaborative collective began conducting projects in rural areas around 2000, initially without the intention of becoming an organization. A small number of graduate students at Indiana University worked with Saxton and a few others to initiate the projects, which branched out into other states including Alabama, Utah, Georgia, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. As the collective increased momentum, they established a conceptual thread that continued to evolve, and in 2007 the M12 Collective was officially incorporated as a nonprofit in Wisconsin and was moved to Colorado in 2008 (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016):

When Saxton set out to turn M12 into a nonprofit, it was done with the intention of dissolving the very rigid, linear nonprofit structure that is hierarchical in nature and makes it difficult for individual artists to get funding for projects, while also paying homage and bringing attention to artists working within under-recognized rural communities (Rupersburg, 2014, para. 19).

The transition to nonprofit status was a strategic decision that lent structure to ideas and collaborations. It provided opportunity to seek funding, allowing for greater stability and sustainability, and easing reliance on the self-sacrifice of the founders and collaborators. It was an important step in establishing the organizational infrastructure to communicate and expand on ideas emerging from the collective, and it provided ability to not only support their own collaborators, but others doing relevant and valuable work. Original intentions were to conduct projects internationally, but this proved to be quite taxing on resources and did not allow the collective to “spend the amount of time that [they] really needed to become engaged with a place and with the subject matter” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). They instead focused their energy on localized projects, one proceeding from the other, creating an

interconnected web of activity “across time zones” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Saxton explained that now, almost fifteen years after they began their work, they are seeing the development of “strong international networks of rural practitioners,” likely a response to increased global connectivity arising with the digital age, “massive changes in rural/urban population, and new published works both in print and online” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The M12 Collective is now well established and well regarded for their work, and with support by major arts and philanthropic foundations such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Gates Family Foundation, they are poised to continue engaging with concepts of the rural through investigative contemporary art practice well into the future (Rupersburg, 2014).

### **Philosophy and Purpose**

The goals of M12 can be separated within two areas: 1) functional “institutional” goals, and 2) goals related to cultural production, which includes everything from publications to installations, and public art commissions (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

As an “institution” M12 works to ensure that all involved are “engaged and fulfilled by their participation,” pursuing questions of how the organization functions for those in the collective. The collective is managed similarly to a family group, which lends itself well to its closely connected and collaborative nature. But this presents a challenge due to the group’s continually changing makeup, and people involved naturally step in and out over the years. Lastly, M12 works to maintain an “equilibrium between the many different ideas and personalities” within and during the production of work (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The objectives related to cultural production constantly change with the work, but according to Saxton, the collective maintains an overarching ambition through its activity: “continually evolve an idea until we feel like we've exhausted it, or we are satisfied with the different iterations and can move on to new ideas,” chasing them down as far as they will go (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). This elongated process allows for deeper investigation of the subject and related concepts, and the exploration of those ideas through different mediums. It supports “connective meaning,” whereby understanding is composed through the multiplicity of individual parts, none of which stand on their own, but collectively contribute to a complex whole. It permits flexibility to revisit past projects, and pursue related tributaries, all resulting in the construction of a holistic and multidimensional account of rural space and rural life.

A recent project titled “The Breaking Ring,” a “site-specific installation and social sculpture about wild horses in the American West,” was developed during an M12 residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute in 2015, and provides a good example of this iterative process (<http://www.ccasantafe.org/current-exhibitions/612-the-breaking-ring>, April 19, 2016). “The Breaking Ring” is a “twenty-four-foot diameter horse breaking ring, or what might be called a round pin” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). The project was conceived through “an interest in wild horses and wild horse slaughter” which manifested as a book publication “focused on equine culture,” and a year-and-a-half later has “formed into this physical installation in a contemporary art space” that is activated through various forms of programming in which “different community groups come in and inhabit the ring.” This includes activities from business meetings to contemporary dance, knitting gatherings, children’s game

night, and reading circles. The breaking ring as social sculpture becomes “a metaphor for breaking down social ills,” Saxton explained.

The scale of The Breaking Ring is large enough to hold a horse, though it will only hold people, ideas, conversations, and performances for the run of the exhibition. Surrounded by the pages of *An Equine Anthology*, the ring faces all sides of wild horse politics. M12 remains neutral in all of their projects, aiming to explore the many facets of an issue rather than claim a bias (<http://www.ccasantafe.org/current-exhibitions/612-the-breaking-ring>, April 19, 2016, para. 4).

The project will culminate in a series of photographs documenting the activities within the space. Through these variations, the collective has continuously explored ideas around rural aesthetics, “looking at rural visual language, architectural structures and vernacular spaces” which is conveyed in the exhibition (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

As founder, Richard Saxton has maintained an involved role in the development and continuance of the M12 Collective. His personal philosophies and relationship to the rural guide his own practice but also somewhat influence the organization. In a conversation around the value of contemporary art practice in a rural context, Saxton explained:

I personally feel that we are entering a time of extreme social and environmental chaos... Part of that is not being grounded, part of that is not having a strong sense of community, and part of that is not be responsible to our resources and each other (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

From my own perception it seems highly out of balance, and in some ways, the cultural system is sort of sick because it's so narcissistic, so based on its own back-patting and self-congratulatory desires. I see all these things through urban museums and the global art world, and it's elitist, it's overly capitalist, not community driven, not democratic, and it's not responsible. I (we at M12) certainly don't identify with any of those values and in many ways are working as an antidote to this ill system (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

He discussed the value of the rural within a larger global context, in terms of aesthetics:

If you are engaged in rural spaces, there is sort of a sense of wonderful crudeness that exists. There are mistakes, there is ugliness, there is dysfunction and fracture. But for me, all of those things...that is the aesthetic statement. And I think there is something to be learned through that in a time when we're constantly trying to make everything perfect in form. The rural reminds us that forms are always in flux, that they need to be patched, and that the edges of the things that we create and make are always available to be altered or mended. (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

For Saxton, it seems that the nature of rural space, rural aesthetics, and rural life provide an alternative philosophy that could benefit a volatile global culture:

I think there's a sense of humbleness, and a sort of greatness and majesty that can be found through the simplicity of time spent away from people, away from devices, in touch with the elements. Rural people still live by the seasons for the most part, a very old way of living, an indigenous way of living. That is something I think we can learn from and should be paying more attention to in our contemporary world (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The bigger picture demonstrates how exploration of rural space and rural aesthetics may provide a portal to deeper learning and critical engagement with concepts of global contemporary culture. It begins with asking questions of what “rural” can offer for a deeper understanding of the past, present and future state of contemporary society.

Through an exploratory and iterative process, the M12 Collective mobilizes artists and creative practice as a means to “understand and participate in the changes in rural space” within contemporary context (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). The collective investigates rural aesthetics, landscape, and space, converses with the rural narrative, and “participates in the continual conversation about creativity in rural spaces” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The countryside is enriched with a long cultural history. As an institution, the M12 Collective accepts “an obligation to continue that rich tradition of creative individuals who draw their inspiration from spaces that are not in the city” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April



19, 2016). The M12 collective works primarily in rural areas, its work inhabiting rural space and altogether exploring rural aesthetics and creative practice. The creative minds who constitute the collective, experiment with these concepts through a connective practice to define a new rural aesthetic (Goebel, 2012, Rupersburg, 2014). The connection of artists to place and their interaction with rural space is essential to the work (Goebel, 2012).

Through this practice, artists direct attention to the rural in contemporary culture, investigating an area that holds great significance, and exploring “community identity and the value of often under-represented rural communities and their surrounding landscapes” (<http://m12studio.org/about>, May 3, 2016, para. 2). Kirsten Stolz, former Director of Programs for M12, explains that these places have been apathetically “overlooked by our culture” as “not worthy of investment” and simplistically viewed as “fly-over zones” (Rupersburg, 2014, para. 3). The practice exposes and acknowledges new perspectives, contributing to the construction of a new rural narrative as interpreted and communicated by artists, and invites contemporary practitioners to critically investigate the rural/urban continuum and the changing rural landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (<http://m12studio.org/about>).

The practice itself stems from the holistic philosophy of the organization, which operates in many ways through the idea of a collection of many parts and perspectives contributing to a whole. This philosophy is exemplified in the collaborative nature of the organization through which many different creative minds contribute their perspectives, and through the multitude of diverse projects that collectively tell a non-linear story of the rural. It is an intensely interdisciplinary, collaborative, dialogic and “connective practice proudly rooted in rural space” (Handwerker & Saxton, 2014, p. 17):

Our practice, like the places that inspire it, is never stagnant. It’s raw, nostalgic, revivalist, and futuristic – whatever it needs to be at any given moment. It is shaped by

the seasons and the weather, by the harvests, markets and migrations (Handwerker & Saxton, 2014, p. 17).

It abides by neither mandated style nor medium, and connects varying fields, such as folklore which “has increasingly become an interest and focus” of M12 (Rupersburg, 2014). Through this collaborative practice, the M12 Collective strives “to be stewards of effective local and global creative problem solving, and a community resource for evolutionary thinking and innovative communication” (<http://m12studio.org/about>, May 3, 2016, para. 2).

The work of M12 is inherently project-based, and often implemented over a long period of time, with many projects taking several months and some several years (Rupersburg, 2014). The variances in participants, collaborators and communities result in a “range of approaches and themes: “dirt track racing, ornithology, potluck dinners, revivals and town halls, gardening, farming and ranching, family, community building, and music” (Handwerker & Saxton, 2014, p. 17). They also take on public art commissions and exhibitions.

M12 acquires a social identity through its collaborative network of creative minds, and the many ways its projects are engaged with a relevant “social discussion.” Many of its projects, such as the Breaking Ring, are socially-based in some way. But rather than relying on structured, programmatic engagement, the social nature of the work is an undefined and somewhat ambiguous natural extension, an inevitable part of practicing such work in a small town or community. “Some of our projects are *socially engaged*,” says Saxton, “but I don’t particularly attach myself to that as a cornerstone of the practice” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Just as artists come to be involved in the work of the collective, so do other people, including local residents, and “that dynamic changes based on each project,” but it is always naturally occurring (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). This philosophy relates back to the idea of M12 as a foundationally holistic organization:

There [is not] a hierarchy between curation, education, and the creation of new works, which you would see in a traditional cultural institution where the curators have the power, the education does the outreach and maybe the community programs (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

On the other side of this continuum are potlucks and other events M12 has organized that bring people together in a more intentional way, but still come about organically. Each October, M12 extends an open invitation to the Big Feed, a casual “celebration of the regional landscape, of experimental art and architecture, food, music, culture and community,” and a contemporary reincarnation of a traditional post-harvest social gathering that falls “somewhere between a family reunion, potluck dinner, symposium, and festival” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1391>, May 3, 2016, para. 1, Goebel, 2012). Hundreds come from around the region to share food and music, swap stories, connecting with M12 artists, critics and curators and learning more about the collective’s groundbreaking work. The 2012 Big Feed at the rodeo grounds in Byers, Colorado featured a pit-roasted bison barbeque, livestock showcase by the Deer Trail High School Future Farmers of America (FFA), DJ Rockcrusher spinning Country and Western 78’s, presentations by students from the Art and Social practice course at UC Boulder, readings, film screenings, an array of live music, and presentations about M12 projects, followed by an obligatory pancake breakfast the next morning. Topics ranged from steel guitar, and dirt-track racing to birding on the high plains (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1391>, May 3, 2016).

The idea of “community engagement” is almost irrelevant in a way, because the organization operates in so many different ways on multiple levels. Their definition of “community” is continually changing, whether that be the physical community around their studio and home base in Byers, Colorado, larger networks of dispersed artists and collaborators, communities of interest around their projects and ideas, or a broader national and even international context of engagement with the rural. M12 has worked in Europe, South America,

and Australia, and currently is interested in rural Ireland, China, and India, looking at what different approaches in those distinct places can offer in terms of “how we are looking at rural spaces and rural communities” in the contemporary world. Their work attempts to “grasp” this larger international rural conversation, and “piece by piece, or project by project” it then offers them the “opportunity to tease out a little bit more of an idea in a somewhat specific place” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Despite continual involvement in the larger international context, M12 has a “soft spot” for the Great Plains and specifically the High Plains region in the U.S., and strives to maintain a consistently positive local relationship and reputation, participating in the community around where their studio is based, and keeping good relationships with other business owners in the town (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). Many of their projects originate from this area, but may not always connect with people living and working there:

Byers and the towns we work in are generally of the “one-horse” variety. There’s one grocery store, one gas station, one liquor store, and one art collective. For the most part, people are simply living their own lives, and it’s difficult to live in rural areas. Most people are commuting most days, so they’re not spending tons of time “in town” ... Local folks will come to events that we might have at the studio, if they are able to, but rural communities are so multi-centered these days – we don’t judge the success of our work based on audience outcomes or who shows up – those things are too unpredictable in rural areas and by and large come from an urban-museum centered conversation about the reach of the arts. We simply don’t follow those rules (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

This somewhat “fractured” lifestyle is typical of small towns where commuting or traveling many miles for work, leisure and sometimes just a trip for groceries becomes a necessity.

So we don’t put a lot of pressure on ourselves or the community to say this is something that everyone should be involved with or enjoy. If people come to us, then that’s great, but we don’t go out to actively seek warm bodies in the name of *socially engaged art*

*practice*, or something. It just kind of happens... and we've found, honestly, the sincerest way is to simply cook a lot of food and sit around a table and eat together... and in some ways that's more important to us than any of the *art work* (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

No single aspect of M12 is definitive of the organization, but rather it is the collective of each differentiated part that contributes to a larger network and conversation about rural space and rural life. "If there's anything, we're interested in whole hog, it's aesthetics," Saxton explained, "and we're constantly trying to tease out new ways of translating that aesthetics. It's a moving target, with all the changes in rural spaces around the world, how to represent that in some way as artists" (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

### **The Collective and Related Programs**

The collective is made up of a core group of a few individuals who have maintained a presence since the early 2000s while many others have come and gone. There are about 12 regular collaborators or contributors at any point in time but this "ebbs and flows" with the needs of each project (Rupersburg, 2014, para. 8). The process and resulting work derives from an organic network of people, a sort of family, from a wide range of disciplines repeatedly interested in working together and supporting one another:

I cherish having with me along the way, people who engage the same questions but from their own points of view. We're a revolving group of thinkers and makers, who, by having simply crossed life paths, have become part of an ongoing dialogue. We work together as one, whether we are two or twelve in the office or a small troop in the field. At the end of our workday, we keep the conversation going over a whiskey at the local tavern (Handwerker & Saxton, 2014, p. 19).

New connections are sparked with each endeavor, continually expanding the network of collaborators and ideas. Saxton describes the way they function as a collective as similar to the old operated telephone switchboards:

It's not linear... They're sort of plugging in, or patching in different people. So there is a network, and maybe there's some organization there, but for the most part, it is quite random. When things pop up, you plug in, and sort of operate there, and then something else pops up in another place... That's similar to the social makeup of the group too. My role, as the founder of the studio, and as director, is to keep a view on that switchboard as much as possible, so we're not going off the rails to another completely different system, which can happen quite easily when you're working with a lot of people. (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The collective operates in a couple of different ways, through the work of its continual collaborators, through self-initiated projects and through initiatives run through the Byers, Colorado studio that engage visiting experts, students, and other creative and curious minds interested in working with and through M12.

Most of the collective's projects are self-initiated and self-guided, deriving from conversations within the organization about directions to expand their explorations. They host summits twice annually as "group-think and group-work experiences" which bring everyone together to work on projects such as keeping up their building in Byers, talking through project ideas and identifying potential collaborators and contributors for the future. Outside opportunities for commissions, exhibitions and other projects sometimes appear, which may open doors to new relationships or channels for increased public exposure, providing generative new directions while still integrating with the existing practice. Those involved with the collective continually keep watch for potential places that might have interest in M12 projects, or potential collaborators and contributors whose work might be familiar or who might "have something interesting to offer the larger collective dialogue" (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

M12 also runs initiatives that emanate from The Feed Store, their office and studio in Byers, Colorado. While these initiatives are different in many ways, they generally support other

people to come to M12 to work on projects that both they as an individual and the collective are interested in, which comes together as part of the conceptual portfolio of work within M12.

Action on the Plains is M12's visiting artist and visiting expert program that supports contemporary art and "experiential art-making activities" in the rural environments near the towns of Byers and Last Chance (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1344>, May 3, 2016). National and international artists, writers, anthropologists, folklorists and other practitioners from around the world are invited by M12 to create work that resonates with rural life within Colorado and in a broader context. Artists might choose to work with students, community groups, area businesses, and local citizens through the process. Their connection to place, people, landscape and each other informs the work, builds on existing rural creative practices, and contributes to a "team approach" expanding on the rural narrative. Their work reflects and responds to "the vernacular of Colorado's high plains," engaging with the local landscape and communities, and "creating new work that is really based of these places" (Rupersburg, 2014, para. 11).

M12 selects creative practitioners whose work is on the cutting edge of an every-expanding international dialogue surrounding art practices in rural environments... The interconnectivity between artists, citizens and landscape is the principal point of departure through which all activities are conceptualized and realized (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1344>, May 3, 2016).

M12 provides housing, but travel and additional support varies depending on the visitor and the funding circumstances (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). An apartment adjoining the studio is used to accommodate up to fifteen visitors. The collective is constantly applying for funding to support as much as possible, but as Saxton explained, they are also "very specific about running a zero-dollar budget," wanting to spend everything acquired to produce work (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Together the collective establishes guidelines each year depending on how they envision the work tying into an ongoing “conceptual thread” to which those artists contribute. The guidelines are conceptualized both prior to and during the artists’ time in Byers. M12 typically has a preliminary idea of each person’s interests and existing work which allows them to select potential participants. Through subsequent conversations with the artists, M12 gauges interest in particular directions, and then brings all of this information back to a discussion within the collective from which they come up with guides for the work depending on the participants, their research interests, and the current output goals of the collective. The resulting concept is then presented to the participating artists and the process unfolds (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

For instance, this year we have an architect, an anthropologist, a critic, and a writer coming. In the typical residency program, and I don't really like the term “residency program” at all... the institution just invites people, and they all kind of stay in their own world, and that's fine, there's a place for that. One place where we differ is that we create a thread, a conceptual thread, through how all these different people will participate. What we're interested in [this year] is engaging with the small cultural organizations that are around the Colorado Eastern plains. So we'll set up guideposts for them, that they will engage with, and then they'll produce something based on the fusion of their personal interests and the collective guideposts (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The process of visiting artists or experts creating work framed by “guideposts” creates connection between the different projects, again supporting the idea of holistic exploration of concepts through distinct but jointly related interpretations. It allows for the artists to make their own work but in a way that is “inspired by the plains region” and responsive to the specific place. The results are then “compiled together into an anthology” documenting and collecting ideas “partly for [their] own research and partly for sharing with the larger field” (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016). M12 continues to work from these explorations,



responding and transforming in ways that may lead to eventual publications, exhibitions or other projects.

Structuring a collective format, and engaging with other artists was a natural progression for M12 from its inception, propelled by people instinctively working together to undertake, through a creative process, the things that they thought should be accomplished. Some are more involved than others, but true to its “collective” identity, the M12 is based on collaborative, integrated process with multiple efforts contributing to a larger conversation and conceptual network, rather than artists focusing solely on their individual self-interests:

We're not that interested in someone just showing up and just flexing their own individual creative genius muscles. So much of this is based on a collective identity. By bringing other people in, it's an extension of continuing to learn and to water the garden so to speak, to keep things fresh... We're much more conversational, and our whole goal is creating this network of ideas through connective projects (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

The International School of Rural Experiences (ISRE) functions similarly to Action on the Plains but with a tighter, more condensed structure. Operated out of The Feed Store, ISRE is a highly participatory field program guided by members of the collective, as well as visiting artists, writers, and scholars. The program is directed primarily at national and international traditional degree-seeking students as well as non-traditional students “looking for experiential learning opportunities based on local knowledge and creative fieldwork” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1673>, May 3, 2016). Students are selected on a case-by-case basis through an interview process, and are provided housing, along with opportunities to apply for scholarships and an internship with M12. “Each year, the ISRE joins the CU-Boulder Art and Rural Environments Field School for workshops, field excursions, tours, and lectures... ISRE students organize and host events such as culinary gatherings, regional music events, exhibitions,

performances, and knowledge-share programs” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1673>, May 3, 2016). Saxton relies on his professorship at University of Colorado – Boulder to support these programs through visiting scholars and student learning initiatives (R. Saxton, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

### **Other Program and Project Strategies**

M12 maintains a physical presence through The Feed Store, its office and studio space in the unincorporated town of Byers, Colorado (population 1,200) that operates as its base of activity 40 miles east of Denver. “Once a bank, post office, grocery store, and feed and ranch supply shop, the 4,000 square foot building now serves as an experimental space for rural culture” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/2012>, May 3, 2016). The versatile space holds the collective’s design office, an exhibition and workshop space, resource library, residency hall, kitchen, and outdoor fabrication space. The Feed Store serves resident artists and students associated with the University of Colorado-Boulder Field School.

The collective stewards what they call The Experimental Site (EXPSITE), 40 acres of grassland prairie on the High Plains near Last Chance, Colorado, an unincorporated community of somewhere around twenty people situated in a sparsely populated area of the state. “Created in partnership with the Washington County Colorado Commissioners, EXPSITE provides an expansive space for the generation of ideas and experiences directly inspired by the landscape and livelihood of the region” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1363>, May 3, 2016). This open space rests at the intersection of somewhere and nowhere all at once, providing an expansive, physical territory or frontier for the creation and exploration of ideas. It is a place where anything can unfold, exemplary of the relationship of open space and open mind. The work that is

generated here can't help but be “directly inspired by the landscape and livelihood of the region” (<http://m12studio.org/archives/1363>, May 3, 2016). The M12 Collective uses the site for long-term collaborations and the development projects from the collective and its visiting researchers, writers and artists. The EXPSITE will be one of the focus areas for the collective group over the next few years and they anticipate opening the project to the public in 2019.

## CHAPTER NINE

### CASE STUDY: EPICENTER, GREEN RIVER, UT

Epicenter is a multifaceted nonprofit community design center very closely connected to its home town of Green River, Utah (population 952). This organization is “committed to creating positive change locally by providing resources to residents through active involvement in [the] community” (<http://ruralandproud.org/about/>, May 4, 2016). They develop initiatives to support housing, economic and community development, and arts and culture to impact wellbeing and accentuate the “rural pride and pioneering spirit” of Green River (<http://ruralandproud.org/about/>, May 4, 2016).

Epicenter was founded in 2009 by Auburn University architecture graduates Jack Forinash, Maria Sykes, and Rand Pinson who had found themselves inspired by the Rural Studio at Auburn, an “off-campus design-build program” that “gives architecture students a more hands-on educational experience while assisting an underserved population in West Alabama’s Black Belt region” (<http://www.ruralstudio.org/about/purpose-history>, April 21, 2016). While not every aspect of the Rural Studio was exemplary, their community-oriented projects and philosophy, that everyone deserves good design, was influential for the trio who were eager to

get their hands dirty and to mobilize their abilities and passion in the name of positive change (High Desert Test Sites, 2015).

The idea of moving to Green River preceded the concept of the organization. A local Green River community center was seeking ambitious individuals to work with them through AmeriCorps VISTA positions in developing affordable housing and creative programs, providing an opportunity for Forinash, and later Rand and Sykes to begin working in the town (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). The trio was interested in solving some of the housing problems in the area, at the time focusing mostly on architecture, and building an arts presence, potentially bringing artists and designers into Green River. What originated as a temporary stay resulted in the purchase of a century-old “downtown” bar through a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from the United States Department of Agriculture. It led to the eventual redesign and renovation of the historic building which, after a year of involvement in Green River, became the permanent headquarters for a new community-centric organization that would become a valued local resource (High Desert Test Sites, 2015).

Epicenter is organized and operated by a multidisciplinary crew of young professionals who “work in the fields of architecture, design and community and economic development” (High Desert Test Sites, 2015). The three full time staff include a Principal of Housing, Principal of Arts & Culture, and Principal of Economic Development and are supported by AmeriCorps VISTAs, part-time housing specialists, as well as interns, contractors, and visiting artists. VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) is an AmeriCorps program that engages committed individuals in a year of intensive service fighting domestic poverty (<http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/ameri-corps/ameri-corps-vista>, May 30, 2016).

There is a long history within architecture/design/art of utilizing AmeriCorps concepts. Some people call this public interest design, design-thinking, being a citizen

architect/artist, human-centered design, social-practice art, public practice, post-gallery/studio, site/context-specific work, and/or community-based design. The name and the jargon changes every couple of years, but the idea stays the same: art/design is for everyone, the arts/designer should work with (not for) the community, and the work should honor place and context (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 7).

This work is multidisciplinary by nature and does not warrant a clear and easy definition which makes it all the more flexible and adaptable, and allows for a unbounded convergence of architecture, art, design and community development. Forinash and Sykes do not identify as architects but instead think of themselves as “architecturally trained designers” even though little of their time is devoted to design. “In many ways, we do like to think of ourselves as redefining what an architect can be—as inspired by Samuel Mockbee [of the Rural Studio],” Sykes stated during a recent interview, “we’re blazing our own path since we’re doing this sort of work in a rural environment and outside of academia” (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 8).

### **Philosophy and Purpose**

The town of Green River, Utah is located at the convergence of the Green River, Interstate 70 and the transcontinental railroad, historically marking one of the few river crossings for miles (Epicenter, 2015). One of many places often called “the Crossroads of the West,” it is “the only town of consequence and place to ford Green River’s namesake for many miles and has been a welcomed sight to pioneers, cattlemen, outlaws, and modern travelers alike” (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 13). A true western town, Green River is marked by a history of roughneck settlers and “community-minded do-it-yourselfers who are equally as likely to usher at church as to fix a tractor transmission” (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 13).

Green Riverites and their descendants are pioneers and settlers, cattle ranchers, farmers, radical entrepreneurs, and boatmen on the roughest rivers in the country. Green River is full of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of folks with give-the-shirt-off-of-your-

back-hearts. Don't double-cross them, though, or you're looking at a lifetime grudge. You'll find people fighting over water rights one day and supporting a church event together the next (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 9).

The surrounding area is a recreational mecca, with potential to be an exemplary destination for sightseeing and adventure. The unique landscape is home to many natural wonders including the Green and Colorado Rivers, Arches National Park, Canyonlands National Park, Goblin Valley State Parks, the San Rafael Swell, and "countless sites of petroglyphs, pictographs, canyons, washes and trails" (High Desert Test Sites, 2015). Green River is also surprisingly geographically connected, defying any assumption that "rural" assumes complete isolation. The local river connects to the Colorado river which leads to the Grand Canyon, the interstate provides direct connection within six hours to Las Vegas or Denver, and the Amtrak stop in town accesses to San Francisco or Chicago (High Desert Test Sites, 2015).

According to Maria Sykes, Principal of Arts & Culture, Green River is a lot more than it seems at first glance, and with time spent, reveals its "significance" in an interesting culture, a rich history, and people that are closely connected to the landscape. "Once you spend a few months here," she said, "it's the sort of place that really unfolds for you" (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Like most anyone who might come to somewhere from elsewhere, Epicenter's co-founders came to Green River with naïve assumptions that were tested and broken down as time passed. "For example, one of our first projects was to design and build a Habitat for Humanity House," Sykes explained, "which is something that had never been done in Green River or [anywhere near here]" (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). While the project succeeded in terms of its end goal, it required an immense amount of resources and time, and was not preceded by research or data collection. As their relationship with the community

progressed, Epicenter leadership discovered that people in Green River are proud and self-sufficient, therefore not interested in handouts. This led them to rethink some of their program functionalities, offering loans for home repairs instead of grants, and certainly reconsidering spending such significant resources on a singular housing project. “A lot of our programming and our attitudes have been shaped by living here for so long,” Sykes said, through “making mistakes and having our misconceptions shattered” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 19, 2016).

Sykes’ experience has also “reaffirmed [her] conjecture that rural places are not a cultural desert. There is history, folklore, heritage, tradition, and unique culture [there] not immediately apparent” (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 9). Despite its vibrant history and uniquely astounding relational landscape, the small town continues to serve as a waypoint for passersby who perceive loftier destinations.

Like many rural places, Green River suffers from underinvestment and the continued outward migration of its young people in search of opportunities elsewhere. There is a noticeable lack of a population between ages 18 and 35, and with 44% of commercial buildings on Main Street and Broadway vacant, the downtown serves as a reminder of the luster that once was (Epicenter, 2015, High Desert Rural Test Sites, 2015). Epicenter is one partner among several in the broader endeavor to influence positive change in Green River “to keep prosperity there rather than see it pass through” (Epicenter, 2015). They work with a large number of local and regional partners in different fields and through continual community engagement efforts to develop a model of practice for how places like Green River might flourish. Partners range from local government and community groups to state departments, universities, and regional associations



(<http://ruralandproud.org/about/>, April 21, 2016). Epicenter maintains a close connection with the community, especially city officials:

The local government is very transparent. If I have a problem with a local policy, I go directly to the mayor or city council; they listen. It's empowering to have a voice and be heard. I'm even running for city council this year, which is not something I would have done in an urban place.

With the motto "rural and proud," Epicenter re-envisioned "rural" as an asset rather than a hindrance and local small town character as a strength against adversity. They are sincerely dedicated to Green River and work harmoniously with and for residents, "capitalizing on existing systems, infrastructure and the local expertise" to increase quality of life and communicate about the place through design-based solutions (<http://ruralandproud.org/>, April 21, 2016). They think of design broadly, whether creative, architectural, community-based or from the perspective of an artist. The organization maintains a reciprocal relationship with the community with each entity actively engaging, collaborating and learning with and from the other.

I've learned that I need this place, and this place needs me. Living in a city, you're literally one in a million (or more). Sure, you can make a difference in a big city as a designer or architect, but in a town of 952, you are able to witness your successes (and failures). Renovating one of ten historic "downtown" buildings in a rural town is a big deal (High Desert Test Sites, 2015).

Epicenter takes a holistic approach in supporting their community by providing resources and assistance through three main areas: housing, economic and business development, and arts and culture (Epicenter, 2015). Their work begins with ideas based in the community, which are nurtured and translated into plans, and finally swept into action (Epicenter, 2015). According to Sykes, it is difficult for them to be specific about goals and strategies because everything they do is holistic and interconnected, a keystone of their work:

A lot of people think we're trying to do too much, but in our opinion, you can't strengthen the local economy, working with local businesses, without also looking at the available

housing and housing conditions, and the people who work at those businesses. And you really shouldn't be thinking about those things or trying to solve those problems without thinking about the culture of this place, and the creative part of the community as well. We see it as all working together (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

The most recently published annual report states that “at no point since Epicenter’s founding has there been as much optimism regarding Green River’s future” (Epicenter, 2015). Epicenter and its many partners have made significant improvements in the abovementioned areas, generating momentum that will carry their progress forward. Just within the most recent year, they have improved housing, created access to arts and culture opportunities, improved municipal streetscapes through city-supported “beautification” efforts, and designed communications that “showcase Green River as a top tourist destination in southeastern Utah” (Epicenter, 2015). Residents even approved a Recreation, Arts, and Parks (RAP) tax of 1/10 of 1% on retail purchases that “will garner an estimated \$25,000 annually exclusively to support arts programming, trail building, and recreational improvements. It just goes to show that perceptions and stereotypes of Rural America can be turned on their heads with diligent, consistent outreach and communication built around a coalition of local community members invested in shared success” towards the betterment of the community (Epicenter, 2015). The recent year held many successes and demonstrated that Epicenter is still a young, maturing organization that will continue to grow and change along with the needs of the community of Green River. In the true nature of community-responsiveness, it will continue to exist until no longer relevant or needed, an idea embraced by its leadership.

### **The Artist Residency**

Along with housing and business development, the promotion of arts and culture in Green River is a major Epicenter initiative, through which they “regularly partner with local

organizations including the City of Green River, the Green River High School, the Green River Archives, the John Wesley Powell River History Museum, and Pyramid Youth Programs” (<http://ruralandproud.org/>, April 21, 2016). Lacking a traditional community center or any other arts programs, residents of Green River do not have many opportunities for self-expression or to engage in the arts, so Epicenter plays an important role. According to Sykes, what rural communities lack in terms of art resources, they make up for in the advantage of a strong sense of local culture (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

The main component of Epicenter’s arts and culture arm is a visiting artist residency program. The residency was also inspired by the Rural Studio, who operated a similar program that invited artists to work on traditional architecture or community planning projects, but from their perspective as artists, resulting in unique and amazing solutions (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). Epicenter also capitalizes on this idea of bringing together multiple disciplines for more inventive and flexible results and encourages the creative stimulus of artists as essential to their projects, programs and communications. There is so much potential work that bringing in visiting artists and designers is essential for the organization in order to have substantial impact. The residency typically brings in a younger age group of people with which to share Green River, influencing Epicenter’s overall practice but also adding to diversity of thought and quality of life.

The process of bringing in artists was very informal at first, similar to “a friend of a friend coming through,” described Sykes (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). It was also more insular, with artists staying more within the realms of place-based work or site-specific installations and not doing anything community-based. While Epicenter was in the process of finding its footing and establishing a relationship to the place, they were not

comfortable directly involving the community. As that relationship deepened, the townspeople became interested in the visitors and the organization became more immersed in Green River, establishing partnerships with the school and local businesses. “At first we weren’t really trusted,” Sykes explained, “and of course they’re not going to trust the artists if they’re not totally comfortable with us yet. But now that the community is beyond trust and is into the stage of support, they welcome the visiting artists with open arms” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). It seems that as the organization and its founders became integrated into the fabric of the place, artists became more welcome as well, and were able to work in ways more socially-active or connected.

The Frontier Fellowship, as the visiting artist program is known today, hosts artists and designers-in-residence from around the country “to perform place-based and community-engaged small-scale arts and design projects” ([http://ruralandproud.org/epicenter\\_projects/frontier-fellowship/](http://ruralandproud.org/epicenter_projects/frontier-fellowship/), April 21, 2016). Epicenter hosts six to ten artists per year who each stay for approximately four weeks, usually one at a time but occasionally as collaborative groups. Artists are attracted to the area’s natural beauty, so it is easy to find creative people interested in coming to Green River, but Epicenter has to work hard to find the resources to support travel, honorarium and materials. “We’re constantly hustling to get those funds,” said Sykes. “A lot of money in our state is going towards organizations that are serving a large number of people in urban populations” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Artists are charged with interpretively responding to Green River and the rural landscape:

If there's one requirement of the Frontier Fellowship, it's that the work you are producing is place specific in that has to be in response to the place, whether it's the landscape, the community, the history, whatever... It's not about an artist coming in and doing a project that they've wanted to do for a really long time and this is just a convenient place to do

that, but rather, coming in and knowing the place or responding to a place (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Sykes emphasized the benefit of a more composed and sensitive “response” from artists rather than an initial “reaction,” which may be uninformed and unaware. Some artists have made work that is somewhat critical of Green River, but not necessarily in a constructive way, “addressing issues of land use or industry that has come into this place and left marks” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). For instance, there is a uranium containment cell near Green River, and the area has a long history of uranium mining which brought a large portion of the population to the area, many of which are still current residents. The town’s association with uranium evokes a negative response from outsiders, but as Sykes explained, not everything is as it seems:

To people who live here, uranium is their grandfather, and why their family exists in this place. It's memories, and it's their family. It's their wellbeing... It still translates today but instead of uranium it's oil. We have a lot of people who work on the oil rigs in the region, and so to come in and immediately be critical of that land use isn't fair... these people really value these jobs, and they're important to them, and they're really proud of that work too...so coming in and being critical doesn't make any sense because you don't know what you're talking about. That's the easy thing to do, to come in and [say], well this is the problem... well no, it's actually a systemic issue that you don't really understand yet (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

So the narrative of local history, place and culture is complicated. While Epicenter supports critical perspective in the name of improvement and wellbeing, they also expect respectful and empathetic understanding from a holistic perspective. Sykes explained that they had experience with short-term residency programs and the negative impact of artists “helicoptering” in, trying to provide solutions or trying to respond to an unfamiliar place. They see duration as important to create more connected experiences. “Our whole practice, Epicenter at large, is based on duration,” she said. “[The residency] is only four weeks, but it’s just long

enough for people to get to know the community pretty well” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

As they continue to learn through the process, Epicenter refines its expectations and specifications for artists. Even as other expectations may change, it remains essential for artists to have a particular interest in coming to Green River. Artists should demonstrate a history of place-based work, or be able to articulate their interest in the place. “It’s not that we expect people to understand this place yet, but they should have really good reasons for wanting to come here for four weeks. That’s something that is really important to us” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Emerging artists, and even those who have never experienced a residency before, are welcome and encouraged. “I feel there are a lot of people who just bounce around to different residencies,” Sykes explained. “We’re not looking to just be another box for people to check” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). While many of the Frontier Fellows at Epicenter have never done a residency before, it seems that this actually can be beneficial. Artists who haven’t fully established their practice yet or haven’t done many residencies don’t come in with expectations, tend to be more open, and are more likely to experiment, particularly within multiple mediums, and especially on a budget. And true to the cross-disciplinary nature of the organization, Epicenter tries to maintain a diverse mix of well-rounded artists working in multiple mediums or disciplines. These individuals aren’t focused on one specific thing and might be more willing to collaborate, teach a workshop, or extend their work in other ways.

During the first phase of the selection process, which involves observing or experiencing the work, Epicenter looks for quality and complexity of aesthetics, interesting processes that may reveal themselves, and depth of concept or intention within the work. The second phase, after

narrowing the field of applicants, leads to an interview process to discover their interest in Green River. Rather than accepting proposals from artists of what they would like to pursue during their time, Epicenter requires all artists to spend time in Green River before conceptualizing anything related to their work. The first one to two weeks of each residency is a time for the artist to immerse themselves in Green River, “absorbing the community and experiencing [the] place... because people just don’t really know what’s appropriate for this place until they’re here” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). It also influences the work they will make throughout the residency, and potentially beyond.

The structure and activity during this initial period of getting to know the place and community varies depending on the season. Artists are given tours of the town, introduced to residents, including the mayor and other business owners. They are shown the town archives and educated on the history of Green River to develop a better and more complete understanding of the place. “Green River is kind of run-down,” Sykes explained, “so understanding that this town used to be 2,000 people and now it’s 950... that’s why there are so many vacant buildings, and why a lot of the homes are in disrepair. The population is half of what it used to be” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). Artists are also taken out into the landscape, experiencing trips on the river, to a canyon or other local nature features. They eat meals with Epicenter staff and other partners and colleagues, developing relationships with people inside and outside the organization. “When you live in a town this small, you live, work, and play together... especially when you don’t have many people your age around. So our residents essentially become a part of our lives for that month” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Generally, the projects that derive from the residency program are either related to the place and landscape in some way, are community-based, or a combination of both. Many artists find themselves responding to landscape through their work, as demonstrated in a current exhibition of work created by Epicenter Frontier Fellows titled “A Call to Place” that is displayed in Salt Lake City. In celebration of the fifth year of the Fellowship, and in partnership with visiting artists, Epicenter organized another exhibition and documentary short film “This is Green River,” also in Salt Lake, that features objects lent by locals along with accompanying narratives to collectively tell the story of Green River (Epicenter, 2015). Exemplifying the convergence of work that is both place and community-based, Frontier Fellow Sean Creeden created a large scale embroidery of the Navajo nation, related to his interest in borders as arbitrary restrictions created by humans as tools to project influence. In association with that project, Creeden taught students about embroidery at the Green River high school.

Another project by Miles Madison, an artist who has continually returned to Green River, photographed spaces around Green River, focusing on the “mundane” and “forgotten in-between spaces” rather than the distinctly beautiful landscape or historical ruins that are typically the target of photographers. After returning to experience Green River both in the summer and winter, Madison installed images from each season in vacant downtown storefronts facing from each side of the street.

Other projects are considerably more community-focused, which have included such projects as window displays, magazines, the Green River newspaper, or other smaller publications. They have also offered opportunities for focused workshops with Frontier Fellows who may work directly with the local museum, senior center or high school through in-school or after-school programs or mentorships, conduct community-based workshops, create a small



publication, or work on self-initiated socially-based projects. Two-week opportunities for teaching artists are available during the summer in partnership with the local after-school program, and artists can also facilitate a weeklong summer camp. Workshops were previously required, “but we eventually realized that it’s definitely not appropriate for every artist that is coming,” said Sykes (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). The degree of engagement with the community varies with each artist. Some projects are naturally rooted in a community-based processes, potentially requiring multiple workshops that lead to the end project, or the work itself may be socially engaged.

At the other end of the spectrum, artists might choose to have minimal interaction, focusing on a relationship with the landscape by conducting field recordings or making other place-based work, which is absolutely accepted and even expected in some cases. Even then, such projects collectively celebrate the distinct place, some focusing on the history of Green River and surrounding area or utilizing the local archives.

Those pieces aren't necessarily serving the community, but they are serving the place. They're providing critical dialogue about this place whether it's in response to history or in response to the landscape. Or to an artist's experience while they're here... it may not be serving the existing community right now, but it is adding to the narrative of the place. (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Artists may have little experience teaching or may be uncomfortable working in a more social setting, which may not permit more extensive engagement. Their connection with the Green River community may be simply through casual day-to-day interactions and possibly an artist talk. And involvement or interest sometimes isn’t straightforward from the perspective of the community either. Residents are busy, sometimes with several jobs and potentially wearing multiple hats, managing farms, businesses, families and other commitments. Free time may be a rarity, and when it is at hand, might not likely involve the arts, especially considering the breadth

of recreational opportunity present. As Sykes mentioned, this challenge means that they continually need to explore “new ways to make work that is relevant to this place and the people that are here, which is really exciting” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

But even in the case of minimal interaction, all artists are involved citizens during their time, attending city council meetings and community events. Their presence in the town and at the Epicenter facility makes it likely that they will get to know the locals, from the town mayor to everyone in the steady trickle through the door. “We like to encourage people to be fully present while they're here,” Sykes explained.

They're not really citizens of Green River... but almost to act like a citizen artist while they're here, so instead of like going home at the end of the day, maybe take a walk and talk to somebody or go to city council, or instead of going in to the local chow hound here and just ordering a coke, have a conversation with somebody... It's about absorbing what this place is through conversations with the community Sykes (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016).

Beyond artist-led and community-based projects, Epicenter has also organized other art and design events, springing from partnerships and the national network of artists that they have developed. The most recent and expansive example was a partnership with High Desert Test Sites (HDTs), a nonprofit based in Joshua Tree, California that “supports immersive experiences and exchanges between artists, critical thinkers and general audience—challenging all to expand their definition of art to take on new areas of relevancy” (<http://www.highdeserttestsites.com/page/mission>, May 30, 2016). The collaboration with High Desert Test Sites, which began as a general focus on the communities and contemporary art programs in rural Utah, transformed into an emphasis solely on Green River:

The original idea was to work with a range of partners in rural communities all across the state, but after visiting Green River and Epicenter, it became clear that this single area was so unusually and incredibly rich and diverse in its natural, agricultural, cultural, industrial, and recreational offerings, that we could devote the entirety of the event

exploring and highlighting this often overlooked region and still only begin to scratch the surface. (High Desert Test Sites, 2015).

The result was HDTS: Epicenter, a “weekend long series of installations and performances in and around Green River” in October of 2015 (High Desert Test Sites, 2015). The weekend featured a “collection of site-specific artworks, happenings and performances inspired by the desert landscape of Southeastern Utah and its rural communities,” and served as a “meeting of the minds,” bringing together two “kindred institutions” to organize and curate the event. Twelve artists were invited to create projects, dispersed throughout the community and the landscape. Attracting “over 70 out-of-town participants who injected \$16,545 directly into the town’s economy,” HDTS: Epicenter demonstrated how the arts could be mobilized to explore place identity while also delivering more tangible benefits (Epicenter, 2015).

### **Other Program and Project Strategies**

Arts and Culture is one of three focus areas through which Epicenter works to positively impact the Green River area. They also conduct extensive work through housing initiatives and economic and community development. Housing related challenges were one of the initial catalysts for Epicenter’s formation. Compared to national averages, a large percentage (27.9%) of the Green River population lives in trailers, with some hosting multiple families (Epicenter, 2015). When the Epicenter was initially conceived, almost half of the homes throughout the town stood in varying states of disrepair, and renters were challenged with addressing issues of neglect in the absence of land owners. Epicenter works to alleviate these issues by providing and promoting resources for affordable housing as well as solutions related to the design, renovation and repair of both residential and commercial structures in Green River. Their trademark program, Fix it First, improves the housing stock of the community through case-by-case

projects that provide urgent minor home repairs. “Epicenter provides upfront cost and expertise and homeowners pay back costs over time” (Epicenter, 2015).

Epicenter also works to strengthen the local economy. They “nurture local businesses, entrepreneurs and ideas,” providing resources, consultation, supportive convenings, and assistance with everything from planning and zoning codes, and grant writing to graphic design and marketing (High Desert Test Sites, 2015, p. 8). The main economic development program is facilitation of the Potluck group:

Epicenter gathers various business owners twice a month, but instead of bringing food to share, the group brings ideas and a willingness to work together at the table. The group is currently working to make Green River a destination through improving communications between all business owners/managers, improving the appearance and hospitality of local businesses, and determining a brand for the town (High Desert Test Sites, p. 8).

Generating opportunity through cultural tourism has become a well-supported objective. “Green River has ‘travelism’ instead of tourism,” Sykes explained. “There are a ton of people passing through but not many staying here and absorbing the place” (M. Sykes, personal communication, April 21, 2016). Collaborations with artists and designers have influenced publication design, branding strategies, and led to physical improvements downtown. Their Design Department provides services for the community from branding and web design to digital and silkscreen printing. Epicenter is currently developing a downtown revitalization plan, “guiding the creation of an attractive town branding strategy and coordinating events during the Green River tourist shoulder season” (Epicenter, 2015). They have also facilitated plans for trail systems and other outdoor recreational opportunities in the area, benefiting those who live in the community but also encouraging visitors to stay and spend time. Through its partnerships with the city and other organizations, Epicenter is helping to redefine Green River as a destination,

rather than a waypoint. They demonstrate how the integration of artists and designers with other development initiatives can result in creative approaches to solving community-based problems.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **FIELD ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS**

An analysis of the larger field and deeper exploration of six illustrative case studies together convey a picture of experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context, particularly through the lens of network-based organizations such as artist residencies and artist collectives. The information that emerges from these studies demonstrates visible themes both across the field and throughout the specific case studies, further clarifying the reality that contemporary art and experimental practice is not exclusive to any particular cultural geography. It is just as “at home” in the country, but like any meaningful art practice, is dependent on implementation that is relevant, responsive, and engaging.

#### **Field Analysis**

At the onset of this study, a broad, surface-level investigation was conducted of the current field of artist residencies and artist collectives across the rural United States. These included organizations who define themselves as such or that maintain an artist-in-residence or visiting artist program that is significant to their identity and mission. A total of 78 organizations

were identified through online research, and were analyzed according to their mission and purpose, programs, level of social engagement, and role of artists.

An analysis of mission and purpose within each organization, specifically related to the role of artists, revealed recurrent themes throughout the field. I was then able to determine how many organizations identified with each of those thematic areas. The top five most prevalent themes across the 78 organizations included: 1) collaboration and exchange, 2) creative stimulation, 3) time, space, and resources, 4) experimentation, exploration and new ideas, and 5) focus, productivity, and freedom from distraction.

Considering the connective nature of artist collectives and residencies and their related programs, it is not surprising that “collaboration and exchange” is a frequent focus across the field. A typical characteristic of organizations that naturally work to construct networks among creative minds, collaboration and exchange are especially invaluable in rural areas where remote location and smaller populations dispersed across expansive geographies might limit such opportunities. Secondly, many organizations accentuate the value of “creative stimulation,” or creative growth, inspiration, and artistic advancement. And an emphasis on providing “time, space, and resources” for artists to make their work was especially prevalent among retreat oriented organizations, but also found throughout the field. Many were committed to “experimentation, exploration and new ideas,” although to varying degrees. The fifth most frequently identified theme grants artists the opportunity for “focus, productivity, and freedom from distraction,” an objective also commonly associated with retreat-based programs and organizations.

The field analysis also revealed three different levels of social engagement across the spread of rural artist residencies and collectives. Twenty-seven organizations identify as

“retreats” or share similar characteristics, taking advantage of the benefits of a rural setting mostly as it applies to the creative process. They commonly focus on rural remoteness, seclusion, and close connection to nature. Many organizations describe the beauty of the surrounding natural setting or serene wilderness environment as ideal for “nurturing” artistic inspiration. The “gifts” of “time and space” are awarded to artists to focus on their work in “quiet seclusion,” with “uninterrupted work time” removed from daily life. Some nurture an insular community of artists within the residency and others offer solitude. Isolation and remoteness might be commoditized as a getaway, refuge or destination retreat, specifically when paired with opportunities for outdoor recreation. In some instances, artist retreats appear almost as vacations, a respite from the obligations of daily life in a beautiful, natural setting for the individual artist to relax and focus on their own work. Meditation, relaxation, contemplation and personal reflection might even be encouraged, promoting the isolation of the rural setting as a “sanctuary for the creative spirit” and an environment for renewal and restoration. Others embrace the preservation of an “authentic” Western heritage or rural way of life, capitalizing on the unique history of the area to attract outside artists.

It appears that both artists and organizations assume a passive role in these circumstances. The organizational entity provides to artists what they need to focus on their own work, but then steps back with little involvement thereafter, seeming to exist in service to the needs of the artist. Beyond rural landscapes providing seclusion and creative inspiration, there seems to be little connection to the specificity of place in most of these instances, and notably little connection with the local people or culture. In the effort to maintain a retreat setting for artists, some residencies are not open to the general public and do not actively encourage engagement or interaction outside the residency. These artist-centric organizations direct their



focus entirely toward the achievement of the creative individual, whose growth and development takes precedence. The Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, New York provides a typical example:

Nurturing the work of artists of all ages, from a range of cultures and communities, and in all stages of their artistic career, we offer comfortable private bedrooms, private studio spaces and ample time to work in a quiet, pastoral atmosphere. We are deliberately small in size and we do not emphasize events or production goals. We believe we can offer artists nothing more precious than the chance to work, and we provide everything an artist needs to organize her time for maximum productivity. The Colony does not oblige residents to participate in any events, nor are residents required to share or donate work (<http://www.millaycolony.org/programs/the-residency-experience/>, May 30, 2016).

While these opportunities certainly have value in a particular context, they portray rural place as passive, and empower perceptions of the rural as “other” or “peripheral,” especially when residency “retreats” are communicated as an opportunity to withdraw from “normal” life. Many retreats commodify the rural idyll, packaging intangible local resources such as authentic experience, simplicity, slower-paced lifestyle, peace and relaxation, and offering get-away opportunities to outside artists (Jarabkova, 2012; Kneafsey, 2001). This perspective infers that the rural is removed from normal, daily life, or not associated as a place to actually live, but rather a place to which one might temporarily go for escape. Withdrawing from the responsibilities of busy urban life to a naturally beautiful and isolated place projects the idea that rural life is simplistic, easy, and without responsibility or consequence. Language such as “pastoral,” “unfettered” and “pristine” reinforces the imagined rural idyll, denying the complexities of rural identity and aesthetics. This romanticized and commoditized idea of the rural transforms the countryside into a nostalgic representation of itself, void of real challenges or contemporary issues (Sherman, 2015).

A second group of 25 residencies and collectives seem to take a more traditional approach, focusing on the production and presentation of work by visiting artists. Operating in a more outward-reaching manner than the typical retreat model, these organizations provide opportunities for presentation of work and limited engagement with communities outside the organization through the structure of traditional formats. Less interested in the solitary artist, they encourage a collaborative and connective atmosphere within the residency or collective. Emphasis on creative stimulation is more present here, deriving most often from the setting or from within the collective group. While many retreat-oriented organizations also reference inspiration from the surrounding physical environment, this second cluster seems to do so more actively, involved in cultivating a collaborative community of artists that learn from each other as well as the place in which they are situated. It appears that artists are expected to be somewhat outwardly expressive with their peers through presentations to or within broader communities. Rather than taking a predominately passive role, the organizations facilitate opportunities for social engagement in the form of typical structured programs or presentations such as workshops and classes, artist talks, open studios, demonstrations, exhibitions and performances. Additional visiting artists and critics may be invited to enrich the learning and development of the artists-in-residence, and opportunities for involvement in nearby schools might also be organized. Interaction with surrounding communities may be encouraged to a small degree but is certainly not expected. These residencies and collectives are still artist-centric, but seem to conduct their activities in a more engaged and collaborative manner through traditional structured programs and presentations within their artist community and sometimes to wider audiences.

Further along the spectrum, a third cluster of 26 organizations emerge from the field analysis with a higher level of activity, involvement and social engagement. These artist

residencies and collectives encourage or conduct a socially-based practice. Rather than engagement being tacked on as structured programs and presentations, the social element seems to be inherently rooted in the organization. Collaboration and exchange is valued as part of the practice, not only among visiting artists but with the surrounding area, and interaction occurs both with people and with concepts of place. The organizational entity assumes a highly active role, not only encouraging collaboration and exchange, but providing the infrastructure for artists to be socially involved on a deeper level, sometimes with a specific community and sometimes with a specific concept or context. Several organizations contribute to larger conversations revolving around concepts of the rural, community development, land-use, agriculture and environmental sustainability.

While most of these organizations do utilize traditional program structures and presentation formats such as those discussed earlier, many also explore more experimental and flexible formats of engagement. Such activities include community exchanges and skill shares, collaborative community programming and projects, public art, media, publications, symposia and conferences, potlucks, festivals, sculpture parks, mentorships, camps, films, archives, and community development programs.

The work of both organization and artist seems to be more often responsive to the context or environment within which they are situated. At this level of active engagement, it appears that intentions shift from what the place can contribute to the artist, to instead what the artist might contribute to the place, or a larger conversation as defined by the organization, moving away from an artist-centric model. This tier of residencies and collectives is most significant within the framework of this study, and includes some organizations that focus on contemporary art and experimentation but through a dynamic and flexible, socially-based practice. The case studies

selected from this cluster illustrate this practice, providing varied examples of how such organizations are supporting experimental contemporary art practice in a rural context but through a social approach.

An “mapping” of the field demonstrates three levels of social engagement across the spread of rural artist residencies and collectives in the United States. Complexity and range of programming increases with deeper commitment to a socially-based practice, progressing from little to no engagement to traditionally structured artist-centric programs and presentations, and finally to a broader range of dynamic, more socially-based programs, projects and presentations that are not easily defined. Organizations are dispersed almost equally across this spectrum, with each level of engagement composing approximately a third of the entire field. This discredits any conjecture that “most rural residencies are retreat-based” or that “most of them expect artists to be engaged with the community or a broader conceptual context,” when in fact they are all quite equally represented.

Values related to contemporary art and experimental practice are prevalent throughout the field, with forty-one organizations identifying with these in some way. “Contemporary art” is defined here as creative work that is reflective of a contemporary context, and critically or consciously explores timely and relevant issues. “Experimentation” encompasses processes of exploration and investigation, and an emphasis on inventive new ideas created or explored through an undefined process of trial and error, risk-taking and play. At over half of the field, the prevalence of creative experimentation and contemporary art counters assumptions that creative practice in the rural is stagnant and neither progressive nor avant-garde.

Twenty of the organizations from the field analysis integrate both a retreat-based format with values related to experimentation and contemporary art. In these instances, the isolation and

remoteness of the rural is viewed as an environment conducive to intensive individual creative experimentation. These organizations emphasize productivity and “time and space” for freedom of experimentation, exploration and growth within individual work. Experimental practice in the rural is focused inward in these instances, primarily serving the needs of the artist. In contrast, several other organizations value creative experimental contemporary art in a more socially active way, shifting the intention of this experimental art practice from inward to outward, and resulting in an effect beyond the bounds of the individual artist. Therefore, while rural environment does permit the “space and time” to experiment, invent, and explore new ideas, the organization can direct the intention of that practice in a way that is either inward-focused and artist-centric, or outward-focused and social, potentially in service to a related place, community or larger conversation.

### **Illustrative Case Studies**

This research relies on illustrative case studies of six artist residencies and artist collectives that explore contemporary art and experimental creative practice in a rural context, but with significant variations in philosophy, structure and strategies. The selected organizations represent a wide range of how such practice might take shape in a socially-based way, from programs that were originally formatted as traditional artist residencies, and still retain some of that identity, to other organizational structures that more deliberately push against the idea of the conventional residency.

Rather than conveying tired images of an artificial rural idyll, these organizations consider the dynamic and changing nature of place (Kneafsey, 2001). In all instances, the organizational entity or institution plays a significant role in embedding the residency or collective within a

specific place or within a specific conceptual framework or philosophy related to the contemporary rural context. They demonstrate the ability of connective, organizing structures such as artist residencies and collectives, that operate similarly to “creative clusters” as defined earlier, in building networks to decrease isolation, increase sustainability, and support development. By stimulating densities of creative activity and support for contemporary artists through structured organizational frameworks, they facilitate continual learning and growth in rural areas.

The case studies also demonstrate the unique influence of specific individuals in the development of organizational philosophies. It seems that the inception of several of the organizations stem from the values and interests of their founders. This was specifically the case for the Wormfarm Institute, whose founders were motivated by an interest in growing food which led to a convergence of art, culture, and agriculture. The founders of the Wassaic Project seized an opportunity to energize a historic structure through art and were interested in hosting a contemporary arts festival, which led to continued involvement in the town of Wassaic. The legacy of Coleman Center for the Arts persists through its original author, and the M12 Collective is very much driven not only by its collective engine but through its founder’s continued commitment to investigating rural space and aesthetics. Taking a community development approach, Epicenter derived from the interests of its three founders who were inspired by their experience with a socially-based architectural practice. It that making mistakes and learning from those efforts was a common part of the process, and assumptions and misconceptions were confronted along the way. In each case study, informal beginnings fueled by the dedication and passion of a few individuals led to dynamic, connective organizations that

initiate a wide array of projects and programs with and through contemporary artists to enrich rural space and communicate about relevant issues.

### Socially-based practice

The concepts of “social sculpture” and “social practice” emerged in different ways throughout the case studies. As termed by Joseph Bueys, the theory of social sculpture centers on “the belief that the concept of art could include the entire ‘process of living’—thoughts, actions, dialogue, as well as objects—and therefore could be enacted by a wide range of people beyond artists” (Jordan, 2013, p. 144-145). For Bueys, this socially-based practice rested on a convergence of object creation, dialogue, and political activism, mobilizing processes for creative thinking and “enacting change through art” (Jordan, 2013, p. 145). These case studies exemplify aspects of social sculpture in many ways by cultivating a connective art practice that carries through not only the projects and programs, but the everyday activities of those involved. Like the continuous natural social interaction between all of the plants, insects, animals, and artists in the ecosystem of the Wormfarm Institute, the practice is rooted in momentary experience and social exchange. Donna Neuwirth, co-founder and director of the Wormfarm, described their annual Fermentation Fest as a sort of “social probiotics,” which reiterates the idea of the Wormfarm as an evolving, explorative social laboratory where the lines are blurred between work in the studio and the rest of the world.

The work prioritizes process and is neither marked by a distinct beginning nor a finite end. It is holistic, continuous, experiential, and without bounds, embedded in the life and culture of place and people. For the Wassaic Project, working in a way that is socially-based permits greater freedom to be responsive to their home community. The Coleman Center for the Arts and

Grin City Collective both rely on collaborative projects that defy standard structures or strict disciplinary bounds, and that sit at a convergence of contemporary art and consensus based organizing. Artists work together with Coleman Center and the community of York, Alabama to execute socially engaged, participatory public art projects. Like each of these organizations, they do not perceive separation between the projects, community, and their involvement because it is all part of the process inherent in the work (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016). The Grin City Collective has transitioned further from a traditional residency format to an undefined, socially-based collaborative practice with visiting artists that will have greater impact across central Iowa through active community engagement. Epicenter also focuses on holistic, socially-based work through a community development perspective, and the M12 Collective employs a wide range of multidisciplinary approaches to engage with a non-linear social conversation.

All of the case study organizations incorporate traditional outreach and engagement strategies to varying degrees, but explore beyond those with dynamic, experimental, socially-based projects and programs rooted in rural place, community, or broader contemporary issues and conversations. The “social” element is not easily defined nor described and is inherently part of the practice and related processes, rather than produced through traditional engagement structures.

The work conducted by these organizations is collaborative and connective, with the artists and organizational entity often, but not always, working together in the conception, development and implementation of projects. They work through partnerships and networks of creative minds. In some instances, especially exemplified by the Coleman Center for the Arts, Grin City Collective, and M12 Collective, the institution and participating artists work



collaboratively on a project-by-project basis, sometimes involving locals and community groups throughout the process. Depending on the circumstance, collaborative projects might be developed by the artists, or conceived by the organization. Unless artists have a pre-existing relationship with and understanding of the related context, projects are typically conceptualized through the organizational entity who may invite artists to participate based on specific project goals. It is critical for collaborative projects to fit among the spheres of interest of the artist, the organization, and any other involved constituencies or communities.

The emerging projects and programs engage with sometimes complex contemporary issues through naturally experimental processes, often making use of multiple mediums and perspectives. They do so without relying on the “white box” presentation format traditionally associated with urban contemporary art contexts. Instead, contemporary work is presented in a manner more relevant and meaningful to rural space. Responsiveness, collaboration and designing flexibility in engagement is critical, as well as meeting people where they are (Poynter, 2016). Art experiences might be paired with food, drink and music, or presented in formats that encourage curiosity and are fun, enjoyable, imaginative and inviting. They utilize local aesthetics and materials, and converse with local landscape and local culture. Varied levels of entry and participation offer scaffolding to accommodate different audiences, and opportunities for deeper engagement are provided through informal conversation, experiential learning, and formal education programs. The Wassaic project, for instance, seeks artists and work that not only fits within the context of the area, but can provoke discussion, and potentially stimulate other programming and educational opportunities.

### Meaningful connections to place

Connection and responsiveness to place is one of the most prominent themes that emerges across all six case studies. “We have found that the most successful projects are very closely tied to the community in some way,” explained Molly Rideout, co-director of the Grin City Collective (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Not all socially-based work serves a specific community but instead might serve a rural context, providing critical dialogue specific to place or landscape. In several instances, “place” is manifested as a specific community, as exemplified by close relationships with Wassaic, New York, Green River, Utah, and York, Alabama. Others, such as the Wormfarm Institute or Grin City Collective, might be connected to a broader geographic region as well as a rural community, and organizations such as M12 converse even more widely with concepts of rural landscape, aesthetics, and the contemporary rural context across the United States and even internationally.

This relationship to place is essential for engaging with contemporary issues in a way that is relevant and relatable. As explained through a study by the Montana Arts Council on building rural arts participation, arts organizations in rural regions need to do more to stay relevant and to connect with their communities, which are often dispersed across wider geographies. Part of their proposed strategy for building rural arts participation includes broadening and deepening audiences, and diversifying involvement. Relevance, public value, face time, and making meaningful connections were repeatedly emphasized (Stevens, 2007).

The ideas of building deeper, meaningful relationships within rural communities, working towards relevancy, and diversifying involvement were also consistently expressed. For each organization, maintaining relationships to a specific place or region is of great significance. It may inform their work, increase public value and allow them to grow as part of the

community. The case study organizations embedded themselves in their related rural communities in a variety of ways, through starting local business ventures, organizing projects and programs that improve quality of life, renovating and maintaining valued historic buildings, participating in city government, attending community meetings and events, and creating opportunities for folks to come together, from potlucks and gatherings such as M12's Big Feed, to haunted houses and festivals. They emphasize the importance of connecting with area schools, typically the center of rural communities, and do this through structured programs as well as collaborative projects. These examples build deeper relationships and enrich social capital. By rooting themselves both personally and institutionally as part of place and community, these organizations become centers of activity invaluable to small and remote communities. They embrace adaptability, growing along with the rural places where they reside.

Building relationships and partnerships cultivates trust, stewardship and sense of ownership within the community. The organizations focus considerable effort on building and maintaining positive relationships with farmers and landowners, librarians, mayors and city council, involved community members, fire departments, community groups, schools, churches and religious leaders, as well as numerous partners who share in their commitment to a specific place. Epicenter is exemplary of a well-connected rural arts organization. Likely necessitated by its multidisciplinary nature, Epicenter maintains local, regional and state partnerships in areas of arts and culture, architecture, tourism and recreation, and community development. Such partnerships deepen the organization's public value and connection to place, encourage involvement, invite participation, and increase accessibility.

Repeatedly emphasized throughout the case studies is that visiting artists must be an appropriate fit for the place or community within which they are working. It is highly valued for

artists to have a connection or interest in the place or an interest relevant to the focus of the organization, typically related to land-use, agriculture, rural life, landscape or the rural context, depending on the organization. While the Wormfarm focuses specifically on food, agriculture and land-use, the M12 Collective engages with a larger rural dialogue, and the Coleman Center, Grin City Collective, Epicenter and the Wassaic Project focus more directly on work within specific communities.

The selection process for each residency or visiting artist program reiterates the repeated ideas of connectivity, interest and relevance. Some prioritize skills and qualities specific to projects, and social characteristics such as working effectively within a team. Wormfarm seeks artists with a related interest in land-use or agriculture, and Wassaic Project, Coleman Center, and Grin City Collective look for synergy between artist and place, and seek individuals who would want to participate in community-based work. All of the case study organizations express the value of building a network of artists and creative minds to draw upon. In some instances, and especially those cases where artists work with the organization and local communities on collaborative projects, they may be required to spend time in the place prior to their involvement, taking part in agricultural processes and experiencing local lifestyle. Preliminary interviews are commonly part of the process of managing expectations and ensuring a good fit. The case studies exemplify residency programs and artist collectives that typically require a more involved way of working or participating. Artists might be immersed in uniquely local experiences, live in conditions outside of their normal comfort and convenience, or as in the case of the Wormfarm Institute and Grin City Collective, be expected to contribute to farm operations.

Each organization connects artists with place and community in different ways. All artists are engaged simply through their presence in rural space, within a small town, or as part of a

working farm. Some organizations, such as the Wormfarm Institute, require artists to spend several hours each week engaged in agricultural processes. In the case of Epicenter, organizational staff introduce artists to the community through tours, volunteering, local experiences, or just by being present. These experiences more intimately familiarize visiting artists with rural space and rural lifestyle. Duration is a consistently important factor, with longer time spent equating to deeper connection and integration with place.

### Artists as creative generators

Visiting artists play a unique role in these rural arts organizations. Rather than coming only to serve their own needs, they become part of a larger purpose or conversation. In many cases, the consistent influx of visiting artists serves as a “creative generator,” fueling other programs and projects that arise. They provide a continual flow of fresh ideas and interpretations, inspiration for programming, and renewed reminder of the vibrancy of place. For the Wassaic Project, the idea was to connect the small hamlet with a revolving group of energetic minds to fuel vitality of place, build creative capital, and “to reengage the town with itself” (J. Barnett-Winsby, personal communication, April 6, 2016). Artists bring creative perspective and energy to collaborative projects, contributing to community development and problem solving efforts. They nourish the organization itself, encouraging continuous adaptation and evolution, and enhancing the work originating from the institution. For the Coleman Center, they contribute new ideas, fresh perspective, and a creative energy that encourages experimentation and influences project development.

Maintaining a continual flow of creative minds provides new people to engage with schools and community groups who might otherwise have a limited pool of potential

contributors, or in some cases, little or no opportunities for arts learning. The presence of the artists may also propel creative energy within surrounding communities, encouraging other makers and artists, and increasing local creative capital. “Thanks to its expanding residency program, Grin City has attracted a cohort of creative minds within the local community. Year-round this group experiments with the intersection of contemporary art, maker-culture and rural living” (<http://www.grincitycollective.org/about.html>, May 5, 2016). This sort of mentoring or creative influence might occur intentionally through workshops and skill shares or, in the case of the Grin City Collective, or Wormfarm Institute’s Fermentation Fest, might provide the creative inspiration for local projects to bubble up on their own.

In many instances the case studies rely on the creative stimulation and experimental processes of artists for critical thinking and creative problem solving around relevant contemporary local and regional issues. While most often not an original intention, many of the organizations ended up working in ways related to community development, except for Epicenter which was founded with those values consciously at its core. Utilizing the creative capital of visiting artists for the sake of community wellbeing strengthens the relationship of the organization to its surrounding area. An earlier discussion of the role of the arts in economic and community development demonstrates the expansive theory around community-based creative work. There is large body of existing literature supporting such practices in rural communities, but again, there is emphasis on carefully adapting these theories to specific rural contexts, and working holistically to engage art as a catalyst for both tangible economic improvement and the intrinsic social and cultural health and wellbeing of community. The varied approaches of these case study organizations demonstrate the fact that his work must be defined locally.

These organizations contribute to the positive development of rural place through community building efforts, creative problem solving, engaging with relevant contemporary issues and discourse, and by serving as involved and committed members of their communities, although in different ways and varying degrees. They mobilize art to communicate an alternative holistic narrative of contemporary culture in rural space that challenges mainstream perceptions. Their work empowers artists as the “mouthpieces of culture,” as described by Molly Rideout of Grin City, who direct attention to complex realities, and influence both inside and outside perspectives (M. Rideout, personal communication, April 11, 2016). Organizations such as the Wormfarm Institute and M12 Collective demonstrate the critical value and significance of rural space and landscapes to the nation. Each one of them contributes to this larger conversation, exposing value that has always existed but has been partially obscured through misrepresentation and misunderstanding. As proposed by Hunter (2014) and Sherman (2015), rural art should not be seen as a genre but rather a platform for exploring identity, rewriting rural narratives and positioning relevant issues more visibly in national policy.

#### Contemporary art and experimental practice in the rural

Contrary to assumptions of the rural as cemented in the past, the prevalence of contemporary art and experimentation, as identified through the field analysis and illustrated through the case studies, convey a different story. The case studies demonstrate that progressive art practices can be meaningfully integrated in rural place, and that remote and small towns are conducive to creative experimentation and the conception of progressive new ideas. Rather than transplanting an irrelevant contemporary art practice and imposing it onto a rural context, these organizations view contemporary art and the rural as symbiotic and responsive. They advocate

for connection and relevance, and work through contemporary art practice and creative experimentation to accentuate and build upon an existing local framework. The case studies demonstrate how contemporary art may be presented outside the boundaries of traditionally urban art spaces, and in ways that are much more relevant and engaging.

Repeatedly communicated not only throughout the case studies but also through some of the literature, was the inherent freedom in isolation or remoteness from cultural “centers.” Artists can work in an environment removed from mainstream art world pressures, avoiding overly influential trends and expectations. The work is what it is, raw, unpasteurized, and protected from overbearing institutional influences and cultural generalizations.

Artists also enjoy access to expansive space for ambitious projects that otherwise would not be possible elsewhere, at least without having to navigate special permits or complicated requirements, or sacrifice some artistic integrity. Projects can be implemented that might otherwise evoke closer scrutiny in densely populated areas.

Some of the organizations conveyed that there exists a general attitude of acceptance and allowance towards visiting artists, and a willingness to try new things. It seems that in York, Alabama people are generally willing to take personal risks, try new things, and overcome areas of difference within the context surrounding projects organized by the Coleman Center. Shana Berger, Director of the Coleman Center for the Arts, explained that “some have the idea that people in rural areas are traditional, and wouldn’t be open to avant-garde art practices,” but in her experience, “as long as the meaning is real, and accessible, they’re pretty much hip to try things that are a totally a little crazy, weird, and avant-garde” (S. Berger, personal communication, April 13, 2016).



As rural arts organizations build trust and credibility within their communities, they may gain the ability to do more experimental work, and it appears that some of this trust is potentially transferred to artists working under their umbrella. Artists who work in association with an organization that is viewed as a valued community asset, might exercise greater creative freedom. The benefit of developing a “sense of knowing” in a rural area was communicated more than once throughout the case studies. Idiosyncratic character stands out in places that are small and isolated, but the closeness of a small community seems to result in a sort of acceptance of idiosyncrasies. As Gibson (2010) explained, local distinctiveness and “quirkiness” may be a product of isolation. For the most part, it seems that those who become known, and invest their energy in a small town, are generally accepted and permitted greater freedom to express their unique selves.

The field analysis and illustrative case studies demonstrate that contemporary art and experimental creative practice is not exclusive to any particular cultural geography. Intentionality, connection, relevancy, and social engagement are essential for cultivating contemporary experimental art in a rural context. Establishing a genuine connection to place and investing in community informs the work and builds public value, rooting the organization as part of the place. Working within these institutions that have embedded themselves in the social fabric of community and rural context, artists interested in specific place or related issues serve as generators, contributing creative energy and mobilizing art to communicate alternative rural narratives. This research builds on existing theories to further clarify this emerging genre of arts practice in rural space. It diminishes boundaries between presumed urban and rural art concepts and conventional ways of engaging with contemporary art, providing illustrative examples of

alternative models of socially-based experimental contemporary arts practice outside of urban areas. Hopefully this work will encourage others to explore relationships between experimental contemporary art practice, critical inquiry, and rural place.

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## **Appendix A. Research Timeline**

### **Arts and Administration Program Master's Research Timeline, 2015-2016**

#### **Fall 2015, Sept-Dec (AAD 631)**

- Complete full research proposal, meeting regularly with research adviser
- Draft research design and research instruments
- Complete human subjects compliance training and submit CITI Certificate of Completion
- Submit human subjects application

#### **Winter 2016, Jan-Mar (AAD 601)**

- Refine research instruments
- Convert proposal into chapter drafts
- Plan with your advisor the dates that chapter drafts will be due; submission of chapter drafts to be worked out in agreement with advisor
- Begin data collection and analysis
- Prepare detailed outline of full document
- Begin to submit chapter drafts

#### **Spring 2016, Apr-June (AAD 601)**

- Complete data collection
- Continue with ongoing data analysis
- Write full first draft of final document, submitting chapters to advisor for review and feedback according to plan
  
- April 23: Deadline for draft of full document to be submitted to research supervisor
- May 3: Feedback from research supervisor prior to student presentations and approval for readiness of final presentation.
- May 13: Student presentations of master's research.
- May 16: Deadline for inclusion in student research journal.
- May 16-27: Continue revisions to full document, soliciting feedback as needed.
- May 27: Deadline for full final draft to be submitted to research adviser
- May 30: Feedback on full document. Make final revisions.
- June 7: Deadline for submission of final digital copy with adviser signature.



## **Appendix B. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

### **I. Organization History and Purpose**

- a. For what purpose was the organization established and how has that changed over time?
- b. What are the primary goals and objectives of the organization and what strategies are being employed to meet those goals?

### **II. Program Strategies**

- a. What program strategies have been most successful or not as successful? Why?
- b. How does the organization engage the local community?

### **III. Roles and Responsibilities of Artists**

- a. How, and by what standards, does the organization accept resident artists?
- b. What is the relationship between the artist, location and local community? How does the artist engage with the local community?

### **IV. Rural Place and Challenges**

- a. What challenges have you discovered in your experience with experimental projects in a rural setting?

### **V. Experimental Contemporary Art and Practice**

- a. What do you believe to be the role and value of experimental art practices, particularly in rural place?

## Appendix C. Case Study Recruitment Letter

Dear [*name of Executive Director*]

My name is Stacey Ray and I am a graduate student from the Arts & Administration program at the University of Oregon. I am conducting a study about the role of artist residencies and collectives in cultivating experimental art practice in rural place. I am writing to invite [*name of organization*] to participate as one of 5-8 case study sites. [*Name of organization*] is eligible to participate because it exemplifies the focus of this study as an [*artist residency / artist collective*] in the rural United States with an emphasis on experimental art practices and social engagement. I obtained your contact information from [*describe source*].

This research will build on previous inquiry into contemporary rural arts, mapping the field of rural artist residencies and collectives across the United States, and providing an introductory field guide for some of the socially engaged experimental art practices of artist collectives and residencies in the rural U.S. I hope that this work will advance the emerging genre and encourage others to explore relationships between experimental practice and rural place, further diminishing boundaries between traditional “urban” and “rural” art concepts and traditional ways of engaging with contemporary art.

As part of the case study, I will gather information about the organization and its programs from documents and media, mostly publicly available. For any information not publicly available, materials may be requested from the organization. [*Name of organization*]'s involvement would require very low commitment, including providing organizational materials if needed. I will also be asking 1-2 leadership and/or key staff members to participate in one thirty to sixty-minute interview.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at [sroth3@uoregon.edu](mailto:sroth3@uoregon.edu).

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Stacey Ray Roth  
Candidate for M.S. in Arts Management  
Arts & Administration Program  
University of Oregon

## Appendix D: Case Study Consent Form

**University of Oregon Arts & Administration Program**  
**Informed Consent for Participation as a Case Study in:** Experimental contemporary art  
practice in rural place: a study of rural artist residencies and collectives  
**Investigator:** Stacey Ray Roth  
**Consent Form**

### Introduction

- Your organization is being asked to be in a research study of the role of artist residencies and collectives in cultivating experimental art practice in rural place.
- The organization was selected as a possible case study because it exemplifies the focus of this study as an artist residency or artist collective in the rural United States with an emphasis on experimental art practices and social engagement.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

### Purpose of Study:

- The purpose of this study is to better understand what characterizes the field of rural artist residencies and collectives across the United States and what role artist collectives and residencies have in supporting experimental contemporary art practices in rural America. Through understanding how these types of organizations operate within rural place, and what role they play, we gain a better sense of how to increase support for contemporary art in other rural areas, and whether artist collectives should be part of this strategy. More broadly, this research begins to investigate how experimental art practice, social art practice and critical inquiry is currently situated within the field of rural arts. This research will build on previous inquiry into contemporary rural arts, and provide a field guide for some of the socially engaged experimental art practices of artist collectives and residencies in the rural United States. Hopefully this work will advance the emerging genre and encourage others to explore relationships between experimental art and rural place, further diminishing boundaries between traditional “urban” and “rural” art concepts and traditional ways of engaging with contemporary art.
- The total number of subjects in this study is expected to be **approximately 10** people.

### Description of the Study Procedures:

- If you agree to be in this study, we may ask the organization to provide relevant organizational materials if needed. In addition, 1-2 key staff and leadership would be asked to participate in one thirty to sixty-minute interview.

### Risks/Discomforts of Being in the Study:

- The study has the following risks. First, it is possible, but mostly unlikely, that interviewees may be uncomfortable expressing opinions about an organization in which they are involved, which could cause some minimal psychological stress, but the researcher will monitor adverse effects and work to facilitate a comfortable interview process. Second, there is

unlikely risk of influencing the image of an organization in a way that is not desirable. Any data in question will be verified to ensure it does not do any harm. Third, there is unlikely risk of a breach in confidentiality of participant contact information and any sensitive organizational documents or information, but this risk will be minimized as much as possible by securing data and destroying unnecessary information upon completion of the study.

**Benefits of Being in the Study:**

- The purpose of this study is to better understand what characterizes the field of rural artist residencies and collectives across the United States and what role artist collectives and artist residencies have in supporting experimental contemporary art practices in the rural U.S.
- The benefits of participation are contribution to a study of an emerging genre that will hopefully encourage further exploration of relationships between experimental arts practice, social engagement, and rural place. This study will serve to better articulate this relatively unknown field of contemporary rural arts practice. It may influence artists, practitioners, and organizations with similar interests, expand understanding of community-based art practice and engagement, and provide examples of alternative models of contemporary arts practice and production outside of urban areas.

**Payments:**

- There will be no payments or reimbursements.

**Costs:**

- There is no cost to you or the organization to participate in this research study.

**Confidentiality:**

- The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file.
- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only the principal investigator will have access to interview audio recordings, which will be used only for research purposes. Audio files will be permanently deleted upon completion of any related future research.
- Access to the records will be limited to the researcher; however, please note that regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board and internal University of Oregon auditors may review the research records.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:**

- Your participation is voluntary. If the organization chooses not to participate as a case study site, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University.
- You are free to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation. You will not jeopardize student grades nor risk loss of present or future faculty or University relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

- The researcher conducting this study is Stacey Ray Roth. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at sroth3@uoregon.edu
- If you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, contact Stacey Ray Roth at 406.579.1724 or her research adviser, Patricia Dewey Lambert at pdewey@uoregon.edu who will give you further instructions.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Research Compliance Services, University of Oregon at (541) 346-2510 or ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

**Copy of Consent Form:**

- You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that the case study organization willingly agrees to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty, that you have received a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies. You have been given a copy of this letter to keep.

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**Organization Name**

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**Executive Director (Print Name)**

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**Executive Director Signature**

**Date**

## **Appendix E: Oral Consent for Interview**

### **ORAL CONSENT for Interview/Data Collection – Key Informant: Case Study**

Hi, my name is Stacey Ray. I am a graduate student at the University of Oregon and I am doing a research study about the role of artist residencies and collectives in cultivating experimental art practice in rural place. Through understanding how some of these organizations operate within rural place, and what role they play, we gain a better sense of how to increase support for contemporary art in other rural areas, and whether artist collectives should be part of this strategy.

If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in one interview of approximately thirty to sixty minutes over phone or Skype, providing responses to questions related to the organization, its programs, artists, community impact and experimental art practice in rural place. You may be asked to participate in a shorter follow-up interview for clarification or more information.

Would it be okay with you if I used the information we talk about in my study? This is completely voluntary and you may say no if you do not want this information used in the study. If you agree and we start talking and you decide you no longer want to do this, we can stop at any time. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

The study has the following risks. First, it is possible, but mostly unlikely, that interviewees may be uncomfortable expressing opinions about the organization in which they are involved. Second, there is unlikely risk of influencing the image of an organization in a way that is not desirable. Any data in question will be verified to ensure it does not do any harm. Third, there is unlikely risk of a breach in confidentiality of participant contact information and any sensitive information, but this risk will be minimized as much as possible by securing data and destroying unnecessary information upon completion of the study.

The benefits of participation are your contribution to a study of an emerging genre that will hopefully encourage further exploration of relationships between experimental arts practice, social engagement, and rural place. There will be no payments or reimbursements.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be kept in a locked file. All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only the principal investigator will have access to audio recordings, which will be used only for research purposes. Audio files will be permanently deleted upon completion of any related future research. Access to the records will be limited to the researcher; however, please note that regulatory agencies, and the Institutional Review Board and internal University of Oregon auditors may review the research records.

Do you still want to talk with me?

*(If yes, go ahead and talk and you may take notes if you want. If no, you may still talk with the person, but you may not use any information they give you as part of your research study.)*

Do you consent to the use of audiotapes and note taking during this interview?

Do you consent to your identification as a participant in this study?

Do you consent to the potential use of quotations from the interview?

Do you consent to the use of information you provide regarding the organization with which you are associated?

Do you wish to have the opportunity to review and possibly revise your comments and the information that you provide prior to these data appearing in the final version of any publications that may result from this study?

Please feel free to ask me any pertinent questions related to the research study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Research Compliance Services, University of Oregon at (541) 346-2510 or [ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu](mailto:ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu)