CONTEMPORARY + RURAL + COMMUNITY

Art as a catalyst for creative innovation in rural communities

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Preliminary Research Proposal

Too often we characterize rural places as "behind the times", disconnected from metropolitan centers that are the "real" hubs for creativity, innovation and advances in technology and industry. Too often we separate urban and rural, forgetting that while have their differences, they are also the same. What could happen if we permitted ourselves to think about rural place and rural communities in the same way that we think about a metropolis? Maybe we would find that the country could be just as inspiring as the city, or that it might actually generate more divergent and creative thinking by being physically separated from the grid.

My intent is that this research might serve as a sort of field guide for progressive social art practices in rural communities, specifically demonstrated through artist collectives. There is very little research analyzing these types of practices and how they might benefit communities. I hope that this work could build on the foundation for others to consider relationships between progressive experimental art projects and rural place, further diminishing boundaries between traditional "urban" and "rural" art and culture concepts.

I grew up in Coffee Creek, Montana (pop. 59) which is not exactly vibrant with cultural activity or a stop on anyone's map. While I didn't much enjoy living in Coffee Creek at the time, once I moved away it became immediately clear that this place was special. At the same time that I came to that realization, I also became aware that my community, and many other small towns, are greatly suffering under economies that have not well adapted to the 21st century. Still reliant on traditional manufacturing and agriculture, and hesitant to embrace change, these places struggle to survive within the global knowledge economy. Classrooms are shrinking, businesses are dying, young people are moving away and no one is moving in. There are few cultural activities outside high school sporting events, but even sports teams have been forced to consolidate with neighboring communities in order to be sustained. It is clear that something has

to change, and I wonder how art and creative practice might serve to cultivate a different way of thinking, encouraging communities to develop innovative solutions internally in order to stimulate their own economic and social development.

I am interested in exploring how experimental art practices might serve as a catalyst for creative thinking, problem-solving, and entrepreneurship while also cultivating a greater sense of community through progressive social projects. In the study "Rural Empowerment through the Arts," McHenry (2011) discusses the arts as a vehicle to empower residents to find "local solutions to local problems" as well as build resilience and civic participation. Arming rural communities with attitudes of openness and creative thinking might leave them more ready to tackle social and economic development issues from the inside. Realizing that this is a rather daunting and complex topic, I narrowed my concentration to artist collectives, residencies or artist-led projects, which by their collaborative nature would be best enabled to cultivate contemporary social art practices along with rural communities. How might contemporary social art practices cultivate creative innovation in rural places? How are these organizations and projects connecting experimental contemporary art and artists with rural communities? Why might these ideas be best represented within a rural artist residency or artist collective?

Literature Review

My research process so far has occurred very organically. I began consciously thinking about it within the first few weeks of my graduate studies, but these ideas have been quietly brewing in my subconscious for a long time. Exploring literature pertaining to rural arts and culture has served to better situate myself within the field. A lot of these readings have focused directly on creative place-making and place-keeping, discussing arts and culture in close relation

to place. The Community Cultural Development course by Bill Flood and the readings in that course, including Goldbard's *New Creative Community, Creative Community Builder's Handbook* by Tom Borrup*, Rules for Radicals* by Saul Alinsky, and Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness,* jumpstarted my active research process in this direction. These works provoked me to think about the possibilities of art and culture as a tool for social reform, social practice, community building, and change initiated from the ground up.

The complex aesthetics of rural culture make great fodder for contemporary artists and creative thinkers. "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 (Handwerker, Saxton, 2014)." Organizations such as the M12 Collective are contributing heavily 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 (Handwerker, Saxton, 2014)." The rural sits at the crossing of many contradicting complexities that are pressing up and pushing against each other to create an interesting cultural dynamic: the familiar and the strange, traditional and contemporary, material and immaterial, and permanent vs. transient. Contemporary art is well suited to engage with the complex dynamics of the rural because of its own complexity, adaptability, multimedia nature and the fact that it is rooted in the "here and now." One could argue that it lives outside of the formal constraints of traditional art forms, making it more adaptable and possibly even more accessible to those without formal arts understanding.

By combining community cultural development and rural place with an interest in experimental contemporary arts, my ideas converged at a sort of rural social arts practice that combined the experimental, progressive nature of contemporary art with community

development. As I began exploring case studies of rural arts organizations, these ideas were reinforced by the work of the M12 Collective in Colorado, The Wormfarm Institute in Wisconsin, Wassaic Project in New York state, Epicenter in Utah, and other organizations exploring these concepts. I investigated online organizations such as RACA (Rural America Contemporary Art), and Art of the Rural, a highly valuable resource for rural arts and culture projects. The book *A Decade of Country Hits* featuring work by the M12 Collective catapulted me into the study of this progressive rural movement. It is fascinating that such innovative social projects are being constructed in areas often thought to have been left behind.

Practice and policy for rural arts and culture in the United States is still murky even though it has been continually developing. Emerging policy and research in rural creative industries seems to be starting to make some headway, with recent literature turning a critical eye towards existing practices and policy. It seems to still be unclear just how effective rural arts policy might be toward generating social and economic development, or what the best methods exist for cultivating creative rural places. The lack of rural arts specific research, especially grounded in the United States, makes it very difficult to fully comprehend the possibilities, strengths and challenges of implementing rural arts strategies. My specific research interest is especially un-documented, as it combines several aspects of the arts sector that are not usually associated together, although my interest in rural artist collectives relates to much of the current literature revolving around creative clusters and their strengths in sustaining rural arts practice.

Much of the research relevant to building supportive structures for rural arts seems to be centered on building creative industry or creative economies in rural regions, encouraging diversification, building resiliency and empowering local residents to find innovative and creative solutions to local problems. While these are all lofty ideals, many sources point out that

much of the current theory simply adopts urban practices and transplants them into a rural

context, ignoring important differences between the two.

Some articles that I have read so far observed theories of "creative industry" or "creative

class" with a more critical lens and with a more rural focus. They identified that much of the

literature confirms the role of "creatives" as "saviors of the city," pointing out that much of this

alludes to the idea that alluring creative people [into the city] can improve social and economic

development, and looking at creativity in a limiting way as an economic tool (Bell and Jayne,

2010). The idea of the creative class and the theories behind it have largely been discussed in

relation to cities, and much of the literature supports this with such generalizations about the

power of the creative class or creative industry to revitalize urban neighborhoods. We need to

better understand the characteristics of creativity in the countryside, including different practices,

markets, aesthetics and purpose, and to understand the lives of rural creative workers in order to

implement strategies catered to the specific place rather than superimposed over it.

Some sources provided good analysis of the artist collective as an important generator for

creative activity. Collective artist communities make sense for rural creative and cultural

development, and I plan to do further research on how this sort of environment works to cultivate

contemporary social art practice. Many readings stressed that the close relationship of people and

place is important to the development of successful creative endeavors in rural areas. Many

emphasized the importance of building strong creative networks in rural communities to provide

a supportive framework that can better allow for durability and growth. Such networks and

creative clusters can provide a more institutional framework to support artists and creative

activity in locations that can sometimes be hostile to growth, innovation and entrepreneurship.

The study of rural creative clusters organically suited to rural locations is relevant to how an

artist collective or artist residency also might be situated in the same context, with emphasis on artistic community. Such studies challenge mainstream ideas of urban creative industries and "explore other geographies of cultural production." (Harvey, Hawkins, Thomas, 2012).

Many of the sources that I studied reiterated the over-simplification of ideas about what creative industries and creative places should look like or where creative cultures and creative clusters can exist. 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." We need to be more open in thinking about creative place and creative people, and not allow ourselves to deepen the divide between rural and urban.

Methodological Design

This preliminary research proposal is situated somewhere between pure research, attempting to construct a broader understanding, and applied or evaluative research, paving the way for change (O'Leary, 2014). Due to the explorative nature of this research project, case studies would provide the foundation for my mixed methodological, but mostly qualitative design. This post-positivist approach would allow me as the researcher to better understand the complexities between each organization, the place in which it is located and the community it affects. Each case study would involve qualitative interviews and surveys, and analysis of documents, media and available data. My goal is to better understand how contemporary social arts practice is situated within a rural context, specifically through artist collectives or artist residencies. I also want to determine how they are benefiting the communities in which they are situated. Are they actually cultivating a different way of thinking? Are they beginning to chip away at the conceptual road block between urban and rural? Are they giving communities the

power to solve problems internally? Case studies will be an important tool for me to better understand how these ideas might be manifested in reality and how they are impacting the community and region in which they are situated. I also want to explore where there is room for development and expansion on what is already being done in the field. Many of these projects are still new so there is a lot of potential for growth.

While literature review will not be one of my methods, it will be integral to my work, helping me define the context of my studies within an area that is lacking thorough research. I will be able to deeply explore possibilities within the field, analyze previous studies, and inform my research with theory that will then be demonstrated by case studies and supplemented by qualitative interviews and surveys.

Case Studies

The base for my research will focus on a small sampling of 3-5 case study organizations or programs that incorporate an artist collective, artist residency or artist-led projects to cultivate contemporary social arts practice with rural communities. Each case study analysis would be designed to explore context, intentions and processes, attempting to reveal what the organization is doing, why they are doing it and how particular results were achieved. It is difficult to define "results" at this point without further research, but they would relate to what work and projects are being developed, and how the organization or program has impacted the community.

Much of the literature focuses on international examples so I would like to use case studies only within the United States for my research. The U.S. has a unique rural history so I think it would be interesting to see how the U.S. projects might be different than those internationally. On the other hand, I chose not to focus any specific region of the United States

because I want to look for examples across a wide spectrum. Narrowing location to a specific region could potentially be very limiting, especially since there are already so few progressive social art practices in rural areas.

Community + Public Arts: Detroit provided a good example of case study analyses that incorporated a variety of other methods to understand what was going on in each study, which informed the development of my own case study method (University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2014). Case studies of these 3-5 rural arts organizations or programs would include qualitative interview studies, qualitative surveys, program analysis, and document and media analysis in order to evaluate the organization's activities, its effectiveness and how they are impacting the community. As demonstrated by CPAD, the variety of methods used within the case studies allowed for an in-depth analysis with many layers.

This research would identify and explore themes that emerge across all of the case studies, but would also pinpoint any major differences. This would provide a more holistic study instead of focusing only on similarities. Because there are so few organizations doing this sort of practice, there will likely be many distinct differences between projects and programming and it is important to explore why and how they are different. This might contribute to a broader conversation about "cultural geographies" and how arts and culture programming is varied depending on place. It would be interesting to find out how and why each organization developed its goals, and to explore how they evaluated their communities and developed corresponding approaches for programming or projects. How did the assets and qualities of the place influence their work? How and why did they develop specific projects? I could compare intentions, process and outcomes and whether those outcomes were actually felt by the artists

and communities involved. So often it seems that organizations can set out with lofty goals for

their programs but the result may not match up with their intentions.

In order to choose case studies that accurately exemplify the ideas in this research I

would need to clearly define and understand terms such as social practice and social art,

contemporary art, experimental, artist collective, artist residency, and rural. Some of the case

study subjects that I am considering are the Wassaic Project, The Wormfarm Institute, NUNU

Arts & Culture Collective, M12 Collective, Epicenter, and Coleman Center for the Arts. I may

study some successful urban projects with parallel objectives such as Pioneer Works and

Creative Time in New York, but they would not be formalized case studies. While I have ideas

of possible case study subjects, I need to do further research to ensure that they fit my criteria.

The case study criteria that I have developed include:

- o Emphasis on using contemporary art to foster positive local change and creative
  community problem solving
- o Partnerships between artists and the community
- o Established artist collective, artist residency or consistent artist-led projects
- o Location in a rural community or region.

Qualitative Interview Studies and Surveys

Interviews will provide additional support for the case studies from a more ethnographic

perspective, incorporating human interpretation to better understand the impact and objectives of

each program. An analysis on community and public arts in Detroit provided a good example not

only of case study, but of utilizing interviews as part of the study Interviews were conducted

with project site artists, arts advisory council members, committee members and project staff to

illustrate each case (University of Michigan School of Social Work, 2014). This example

demonstrated to me how to effectively use interviews to identify reoccurring themes, provide

illustrative examples, and compare and contrast project objectives with actual impact. Interviews would allow for a better understanding of each organization's goals and operations and how their programs and projects really affect the community.

For each case study, interviews would be conducted with resident artists or key informants inside the organization, including key administration with important insider perspectives associated with operations, programming and outreach. I would conduct at least one and no more than three interviews per case study. Ideally I will have conducted two interviews for each site. Conducting supplementary interviews for each case study would help illustrate data collected from document and media analysis and would provide:

- o Rich contextual information on the organization and place
- o Deeper understanding of the organization, its objectives, and its projects
- o Valuable information about challenges and opportunities
- o Insight into why and how it is valuable to the community
- o Organizational perspective on how it is impacting the community

Examples of possible interview questions include:

1. In your opinion, why are place and community significant to [your organization]? How does [the organization or program] depend on the aesthetics and culture of the place in which it is situated?
2. Explain the relationships and interactions between artists associated with your organization/program and the community?
3. What projects have been most representative of your mission and objectives? Why?
4. How (and with whom) do you develop these projects?
5. In your opinion and experience, what significance and value does art have in the community?
6. What role does the [organization/program/project] have in the community?

An analysis on the method of interview by Robert Weiss (1994) explains that interviewing gives the researcher access to the observations of others. I think the word "access" is key here, as interviews will not only provide access to programs and projects from which I am disconnected, but they can also inform my research with intimate perspectives into what these organizations are doing, how and why they are doing it, and what the results have been. Because of the interpretive nature of this research, the interviews will be used to better understand human experience, perception and interpretation. While it is important for me to understand the process of these projects, it is maybe even more important for me to understand their impact. Alongside the case studies, the interviews will contribute illustrative depth and density to the research, making a big contribution to better understanding a complex topic from multiple perspectives.

Much like interviews, surveys would provide a unique perspective and rich understanding about the effectiveness and impact of each case study organization or program. Surveys would be the most appropriate tool to gauge impact from the community itself. Conducting surveys for two or three case studies would help illustrate data collected from document and media analysis and would provide:

- o Rich contextual information on the organization and place
- o Insight into why and how the organization/program is valuable to the community
- o Perspective on how it is impacting the community

It would be ideal to survey the entire population of each rural community for each case study, but due to limited time and resources this has to be scaled down. I would be distributing surveys within rural and therefore relatively small communities, so it is likely that even a small sample would be easily representative of the population. For instance, the hamlet of Wassaic, which is home to the Wassaic Project in southeast New York, has a population of approximately 1500 people. The challenge is to choose a sample size that is broad enough and large enough to

allow for enough response data but small enough to be conducted and managed within two or

three small communities (O'Leary, 2014). For quantitative surveys, in order to have a 95%

confidence level with a confidence interval (margin of error) of 10, I would have to set my

sample size at 90 people. This means that if 60% of the population chooses an answer, I can be

"sure" that between 50% (60-10) and 70% (60+10) of the entire population would choose that

same answer (determined via www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm).

Because this is not a quantitative survey, accuracy is not as vital, but it is still important

to be able to verify that the responses are well-representative of the total population. It may be

possible to conduct a form of cluster sampling by surveying event attendees, in which case

surveys could be printed, distributed, completed and returned all at once. It is most likely that I

will be working at a distance from this population and unable to conduct true random sampling,

therefore it might be more feasible to do non-random snowball sampling through email or phone.

Examples of possible survey questions would include:

1. What has been your experience with [this organization]? How have you interacted,
   or not interacted, with [the organization] and its projects?
2. How have [the organization] and its projects influenced you?
3. What projects or events have been most meaningful or influential to the community?
   a. Why do you think this?
4. On a scale of 1-5, what rating would you assign [the organization], in terms of its
   value to the community (five being most valuable). 1 2 3 4 5
   a. Why or why not?
5. On a scale of 1-5, what rating would you assign [the organization], in terms of its
   value to the community in these three areas (five being most valuable).
   a. Creating cultural vibrancy   1 2 3 4 5
   b. Providing challenging and thought-provoking content   1 2 3 4 5
   c. Encouraging creativity and creative thinking   1 2 3 4 5
6. How has the organization influenced your understanding of art and culture?

Based on analysis of other research that uses case studies and interviews I recognize that I need to be cautious about generalizations, and sure that I have enough supportive evidence when identifying themes and patterns across qualitative data. I especially need to be careful to not rely on using statements from single interviewees to illustrate an important point. Themes and patterns from interviews and surveys can be powerful when considered collectively, but they lose their effectiveness when listed singularly. Interviews should serve as one leg of the support structure and need to be supplemented by other data. While interview quotes can be valuable to illustrate information, create interest, and provide personal perspective, they can sometimes put too much emphasis on one idea coming from one individual. I also need to be sure that I identify the scope of interviews and surveys so that they are properly contextualized within the study. While surveys and interviews would be very valuable with the unique perspectives that they provide, I must be cautious not to rely too much on interviews or surveys without other support.

The limitations of this research would mostly be time and finances. Because of the great distance between all of the potential case study sites, it would be impractical to be able to visit each of the sites for in-person interviews, surveys or observation. Interviews would be more than likely conducted over the phone. Case studies would require off-site document and media analysis. Surveys would be distributed through email or printed and distributed at organizational events to avoid high costs associated with mailing. Limited time requires that the number of case studies, interviews and survey samples be narrowed down to manageable amounts. With organizations that are located across the country in small communities, communication and accessibility becomes an issue, especially when trying to reach survey respondents. Places like Wassaic are known for being difficult to get to, and even while technology provides the opportunity to diminish these distances, there are still difficulties with trying to reach populations

used to a more isolated lifestyle. In these cases researchers have to be especially sensitive to their identity as an outsider, and it becomes even more important, and more difficult, to gain the trust of community members and those within the organizations. Working at a distance also puts the researcher at a disadvantage to fully understand the context of the organization and place.

Beyond the limitations of time, finances and location, this research is limited by the number of case studies I am able to conduct, as I would only be concentrating on 3-5 examples. This leaves out many organizations and projects that could potentially provide valuable information either in agreement to or contradiction to my findings.

Lastly this project it is limited to my knowledge and capacity as the researcher through which the information is collected, filtered and organized. I am a theorist. I tend to critically analyze information and think very abstractly so my research could potentially be limited simply by my own way of thinking. Because of my tendency to think abstractly, I will need to constantly check myself to make sure that I am considering practicalities as well. I think that my own experience with rural place and contemporary arts practice provides an interesting background to the project but I will need to be extremely careful not to let my bias interfere with the analysis. I will need to clarify my biases as the researcher to avoid a "self-centric" analysis, ensuring that my own opinions are not interjected. This includes getting a wide range of perspectives without listening only to the dominant voices or the ones that I choose to hear. As O'Leary (2014) said, a "subjective researcher plus the complexities of a qualitative study....makes the production of credible knowledge difficult."

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