

Research Techniques
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The research direction that I am pursuing integrates both experimental art practices with rural culture and aesthetics, exploring ways in which a synthesis of two might be manifested in reality. How might rural culture and rural aesthetic cultivate experimental contemporary art, and how might these practices be manifested in a way that connects art and artists with rural communities? How might rural artist residencies assume this role? It would also be interesting to find out how such practices contribute to community development, and how rural communities can be connected to and engaged with both relevant contemporary art and artists. Research methods would allow me to better understand the topic in general, and identify how these theories and concepts might be manifested in reality now or in the future. These interrelated topics all rely on a degree of exploration, involving research on what projects and programs already exist as well as the analysis of their effectiveness and benefit to rural communities. In order to gain a better understanding of the field of rural arts and culture, and how experimental art practices might be situated within that field, I would likely utilize case studies, interviews and literature review as my research methods.

I will not be exploring literature review here, but I think that it will be integral to my research. It will help 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 interviews.

Case studies would allow me to analyze specific instances where the concepts that I outlined above intersect, why they were successful or unsuccessful, and how they contribute to the community or region in which they are situated. The examples would demonstrate tangible manifestations of my theories. To gain a better understanding of how case study might be utilized in a community arts context, I looked at two research projects. The first analyzed six case studies from a specific program,

Community + Public Arts: Detroit (CPAD), in order to evaluate engagement strategies and impact of the program within different neighborhoods. CPAD planned projects that were unique to each neighborhood and that worked to specially develop the character and potential of that local neighborhood through the arts (University of Michigan, 2014). The case studies were designed to document CPAD's community engagement strategies, describe the process of generating and placing art in the neighborhoods, and capture community impact. In many ways, this relates to what I might be hoping to generate from my own case study analyses, specifically how projects might impact and engage with rural communities.

One thing I noticed was that the CPAD case studies incorporated a variety of other methods to understand what was going on in each study. This included key informant interviews, surveys administered to community members attending events, data analysis, media content analysis and observations. This was a great resource in which to explore both case study and interviews because interviews were a large component of the studies. The variety of methods used within the case studies allowed for an analysis with many layers.

The research identified and explored themes that emerged across all six case studies, which was a very effective way to demonstrate connections between all of the examples. The themes demonstrated where the residents found value in the programs, which is a result that I would hope to achieve from my own research. It seems that identifying value was primarily accomplished through interviews. While the themes from the case studies were useful in making connections, they sometimes felt very generalized and lacked supportive evidence, often relying on statements from single interviewees to illustrate a point.

The report was broken up into six case studies which were each analyzed in the same way. While this was effective for organization and comparison, I wondered whether it was limiting as well. I wanted to know more about how they were different and how one might have been more effective and

why. The continued emphasis on strategies and process was very relevant to my own possible research, exploring strategies for how CPAD evaluated each neighborhood to then develop an “asset-based” approach from the ground up (University of Michigan, 2014). The author continued to use quotes to illustrate the information, which created interest and perspective, but it sometimes put too much emphasis on one idea coming from one person. Each analysis was thorough but lacked the reasons for why the specific neighborhood was chosen or why they chose the specific projects. Too often there was information from surveys and interviews to illustrate the case studies but we don’t know the scope of how many respondents agreed. There were generalizations without specific data to contextualize them.

The second resource that I looked at was a masters thesis, *Cultivating the Arts in Rural Communities of the San Joaquin Valley*, that used case studies in order to develop a guide for cultivating art in rural communities. In this instance, the researcher was providing a more general sampling of successful programs and projects. Each case study explored context, intentions and processes, attempting to reveal why and how particular results were achieved. I found it interesting that the author used his own background in rural arts as a sort of case study on its own to supplement the research, although one would have to be extremely careful not to let this color the tone of the entire paper. He did a good job of identifying challenges and outlining the limitations present in only being able to do a few case studies.

There were many instances of using subjective answers or assumptive statement in conclusions without using evidence. I wanted to know exactly how he came to a conclusion, and while it was demonstrated in the case studies, I did not know how he got that information. It did not clearly state how he received the information for the studies. Each study needed more data analysis from a variety of sources. Also, while each case study outlined the process of implementing art projects, and there was a tone of evaluating success, the author never discusses his measure of what “success” really is, and how the projects meet that measure. The case study on *Rural Vernacular*, a collection of projects developed

by participating artists of the Ground Up collective in Ireland was of special interest because it focused on pairing artists with communities and with local residents in order to overcome the “outsider coming in scenario” (Velasco, 2008). I found this valuable because it identified an issue in rural arts (outsider coming in) and a method for resolving it, clearly outlining how the program was successful in doing so. This instance makes a good point that identifying the challenges of rural arts makes the “best practices” case studies more effective.

Interviews will provide additional perspective and support to my research from a more human perspective, and interviews align very nicely with case studies. The *Community + Public Arts: Detroit* analysis provides a good example not only of case study, but of utilizing interviews as well. Interviews were conducted with project site artists, arts advisory council members, committee members and project staff to illustrate each case. The report utilized the interviews to illuminate future direction and goals within the organization but most often they utilized comments from community members to illustrate what effect the programs might be having in each neighborhood. Most often, these comments were listed singularly, which can provide an illustration, but cannot support a statement on its own. There would have to be agreement from many individuals in order to support a generalization, rather than one statement.

There were some reoccurring themes and suggestions originating from the interviews that provided valuable insight because of their consistent appearance. Interviews from both sides, inside and outside of the program, allow them to see whether the CPAD objectives and the influence on the community actually aligned. The interviews allowed for an understanding of how the program really affected the neighborhoods in different ways. While they were very valuable in the unique perspective provided, the report often relied too much on interview without other methods to back them up.

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, as interview cannot

only provide access to a field, program or project from which we are disconnected, but it can also provide intimate perspectives and experiences, and even provide a window into the past. Interviews can be used to understand experiences, perception and interpretations. This is vital in the arts because we aren't necessarily often dealing with facts; we are betting on interpretations and experiences. Especially used alongside case studies, interviews can contribute coherence, great depth and density to research, making a big contribution to better understanding a complex topic from multiple perspectives. The challenge is that the researcher needs consistency from interviews with others in order to make any sort of confident generalization.

While I am still constructing ideas of what my research methods will be, I am confident that case studies will be one of them. Identifying and analyzing in-depth case studies will allow me to explore how experimental art practices are aligning with rural arts culture and aesthetics, as well as how programs are connecting art and artists with rural communities. I am considering focusing on case studies of rural artist residencies that focus directly on the artist as well as artistic experimentation in remote locations. I will need to develop concrete standards by which to select my cases. In this regard, it will be vital for me to be specific about my terminology. I will need to define words such as "rural" and "experimental" and set specific parameters for the types of residency programs I will explore. Once I determine the specific examples that I will examine to illustrate my research, I will need to collect data through key informant interviews, document and media analysis and possibly surveys or interviews of individuals on the receiving end of programming to better understand how projects are affecting the community. It is clearly evident that having a variety of data provides a much more valuable case study. Once data is collected I will examine key themes and strategies throughout the case studies.

Process Notes

- What am I trying to do?
 - Understand an issue or concept
 - Find a solution (what is going on already and what possibilities are there to make this happen or improve?)
 - Clarify why it is important/valuable – why could it be an effective means of community development/growth?
 - Innovation/creativity
 - Developing a creative culture; knowledge workers – creative economy
 - Entrepreneurial attitudes; dynamic
- Themes/interests
 - Contemporary experimental art; emerging artists
 - Rural culture and rural aesthetics – tied to a place; building on the place
 - Community development and growth – social, cultural and economic
- Questions
 - How is contemporary art relevant in rural places? What are rural artist residencies doing to encourage contemporary art in rural places? What purpose are they serving? How are rural artist residencies connecting contemporary art and artists with remote audiences? What support mechanisms exist for contemporary/experimental art practices and innovation within rural areas? Engagement opportunities? What is the benefit of a rural artist residency? How do rural aesthetics support contemporary arts practice?
 - How is it relevant to contemporary art practice? How does the rural cater itself to contemporary art and in what ways can this be manifested?
 - How does rural culture and rural aesthetic cultivate experimental contemporary art, and how are these practices manifested in a way that connects art and artists with rural communities?
- Potential complications
 - Broad topic; many facets
 - Unusual combination of ideas
 - Very little research in rural arts; extremely little research in contemporary rural arts and culture – this is also an opportunity
- What kind of information will I need?
 - The elements that exist within rural culture that support experimental arts practice
 - Knowledge of support structures
 - Understanding of rural culture; rural aesthetic
 - What role does art and culture play
 - Examples – what is out there? What has been effective and what hasn't?
 - Ideas of value – Is this something people care about
 - Knowledge of worth and value – what is the benefit?
- What is rural? What are rural aesthetics?
- What kinds of contemporary art practice am I talking about?

- What are community perceptions of contemporary/experimental art? Why do I think this is important? Is it valuable to them? Can it be? How would they want to engage/participate?
- What is already being done? How is it being done? Is it successful? What is successful?
- What are the possibilities?

- Qualitative
 - Bias – my own bias and assumptions (experience with both rural and contemporary art)
 - Build on what already exists and then seek out possibilities
 - Look at what has already been done
 - Why and how it has been done; effectiveness
 - How has it contributed to community cultural development? Influence?

- Possible methods
 - Case study – exemplary examples; failed examples; what is being done?
 - Literature review – to understand current perceptions; rural culture and aesthetics; role of contemporary art; what is going on and where my ideas are situated
 - Key informant interviews – experts/ insiders for perspective; community leaders
 - Surveys – perspectives; understanding of contemporary art practices; how art and art programs are influencing communities; current role of art in communities and how this might change
 - Focus groups – (same as surveys)

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