

RURAL ARTS & CULTURE SUMMIT REFLECTION

Arts Program Theory, Participation and Evaluation

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Spring 2015

It is hard to image what happens when you bring over 360 people together from rural place, with rural stories, and with playfully imaginative ambitions for transformation and positive change. It creates a sort of palpable, contagious energy disseminated through intimate, excited conversations that can only be shared by those who know what it is like to really know your neighbor and live in a small town. The arts leaders in these isolated and often underserved places are resourceful. They are scrappy. They have big hearts and unreasonable imaginations. And while many of these rural communities are separated by many miles, they come together every other year for the Rural Arts & Culture Summit to share their stories and experiences, learn from one another, and collectively define what it means to be a rural artist, organizer or creative thinker.

The 2015 Rural Arts and Culture Summit in Morris, Minnesota was all of those things, and as a first time attendee, I was blown away by the sense of community and collective energy that I found there. I was struck by many different themes and conversation topics that were relevant to my research and career interests including authenticity of place, creative placemaking, the role of artists in rural place, rural/urban divides, rural policy, changing the rural narrative, culture and agriculture, multidisciplinary collaboration, and the future of rural America. I will discuss these themes in the context of my own learning and individual research.

For obvious reasons, place was at the center of much of the conversation. Concepts of place dictate so much about the role of art and artists. It was clear that there is a unique capacity in small towns to dream and to create. This was highly relevant to my own research because part of my hypothesis is that rural place is more conducive to experimental creativity as it is separated from the grid, freed from expectations and restrictions. Artists have the open space to have an open mind. There is also a certain authenticity and genuineness associated with small towns

because of its rootedness in place. It all comes back to the land. Rural is rural because of how the land is used. A metropolis is urban because of how the land is transformed. Artists have the opportunity to be inspired by and to respond to such strong place identity. It is a unique quality generally specific to rural areas. The combination of open space and individualistic rural frame of mind, combined with strong place identity provides fertile soil for artistic imagination to grow and thrive.

Creative placemaking was also central to discussion, particularly the artists' role in creatively making place from space. We can use the arts, and therefore artists, to convey outward expression of place, to demonstrate that the rural is thriving. From the outside sometimes it is hard to see this and easier to make assumptions that the rural is dying or that rural place is already dead. Art can tell this story. It can project the positive identity of rural place, replacing the negativity with the truth that is obscured yet right in front of us. This can stimulate development more than anything, giving people agency to create change in their own communities and instilling them with stewardship of place. Artists can also bring people together, tell stories integral to place, and help to solidify the identity that has always been embedded in a rural place but that has not been outwardly expressed. Artists must be considered in helping shape place. They must be included in conversations of development both to provide creative solutions to local challenges, creatively engage the community and to tell the whole story of place. I am particularly interested in how artists can integrate with the community in such a way as to transfer that creative energy over to others, giving local people the agency to have effect in their own community.

One common integration of artists into rural place was through exchange of arts and culture and agriculture. We see this in the work of Wisconsin organization the Wormfarm

Institute as well as many others that are combining the creative powers of farming and making. This organization is of particular interest to me in how they used this combination to break down barriers between locals, the artists and their work, bringing in national and international contemporary artists to make work on the Wormfarm and engage with the community. It seemed that resting on the commonality of creating or making brought together the farmer and artist. It is these sort of multidisciplinary connections that make the arts the connective tissue of our society.

Attending the conference really expanded my understanding of the role of the arts in rural areas and communities. Over the course of a few days I heard about projects across the country that influenced health and wellbeing, affected the quality of life in communities, cultivated civic stewardship and pride, gave locals the agency to affect change, assisted in the passing down of traditions, and orchestrated collective mobility. Common themes included encouraging adaptability and learning, creating opportunities for dialogue, creativity and connectivity between people and groups within communities. Our ability to be creative seems to be one of the best problem solvers that we have.

One of the most influential points that was made during the summit was in regards to the future of rural American and how arts can play a role in changing the rural narrative, and securing a place for small towns in policy and decision making. The rural is plagued by unfounded assumptions that project small towns as places that are dying, places where no one wants to live, and lacking cultural vibrancy and life. This is incredibly hurtful to the progress of rural communities. It is a negativity that even seeps into the locals, further preventing progress and activity and cultivating a sense of hopelessness. Fortunately, the arts can help tell the other side of the story. They can capture all of the wealth, beauty and vibrancy of rural place and help others to see it too. They can engage local people in recognition of this vitality and help give

them the creative capacity to improve their own communities, building on existing strengths and assets. And art can relay this message outside the community, bringing positive press and putting a small town on the map. Using art to tell the story of place, activating people to see their own strengths and abilities and creating a more culturally vibrant community can draw in new residents and instill a greater sense of pride, initiating positive momentum. Once this momentum is on its way, it is more likely that policy makers and people of influence who are making decisions affecting rural places will see that the rural is not dead. It is very much alive and it needs to be considered as equally important as the city. This sort of barrier between urban and rural is especially apparent in states such as Minnesota which has a huge metropolis center in the Twin Cities and many rural communities scattered throughout the rest of the state. When we talk about one part of the state versus another, it weakens the whole.

The summit closed with a conversation on the future of rural America. The convention had stimulated many rich discussions of strengths, challenges and opportunities for rural places and people throughout the few days we were all together. All of the content from the summit greatly informed my own research, interests and career objectives, giving me a better sense of purpose, incredible connections and reminding me why I am an advocate for the arts in rural place. I left Morris with an amazement in what the state of Minnesota has been able to accomplish and how much the arts are a part of its social fabric. I also left with the determination to take a little bit of that creative energy and transplant it back into my home state of Montana. As we gathered in the auditorium for the closing session, that same collective energy found its way to the surface, projected among many voices. The arts have power. We have the power to implement the arts. We cannot do it alone but we can do it together. Collectively we can figure out how to take this Minnesota rural arts movement and make it national.