

COLLABORATIVE BOOK RESPONSE: GRASSROOTS AND MOUNTAIN WINGS

(PATRICK OVERTON)

Stacey Ray and Tara Burke

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Community Arts Management

It wasn't long ago that there was little documented or written about arts and culture in rural and small communities. Even the field of community arts was not well established and lacked a consistent vocabulary or practical methodology. These grassroots areas within the arts were not well understood because they were not rooted so much in tangible material culture, but rather in people and experience. The series of articles commissioned and curated for the Grassroots and Mountain Wings Symposium at Columbia College in Missouri in 1990 resulted in a robust and timeless publication that verbalized many concepts still vital to community arts today. Within its pages are passionate affirmations of the value of community arts by those who have historically paved the way for progress in the field. These include scholars, practitioners, artists and arts and culture administrators, together providing a holistic picture of the principles of community arts, particularly in rural America.

Within the book, we identified several themes that wove together to create what we believed were addressed in creating, constructing and evaluating effective community arts frameworks. These themes included:

- History of Rural Arts
- Local Arts Agencies
- Community Art in Rural Context
- Relationship to Community and Self

The continuation of many themes throughout the articles clearly demonstrates the development of a shared language and common practice. The definition of community arts is malleable and fluid depending on each circumstance but there are core values that persist throughout each case. The compilation of articles, titled *Grassroots and Mountain Wings: the arts in rural and small communities*, provides not only historical background of the rural arts

movement but also theoretical foundations and practical instruction for community arts workers. While it maintains a clear focus on rural and small communities, the book offers many ideas that are instrumental to community arts in general and can be applied in almost any context.

History of Rural Arts

Several of the articles throughout the first half of the text lay out the historical context of the rural arts field. The question of how rural community arts came about is a complex one because the process is not linear, nor is it rooted in tangible institutions or a history of established policies. While certain policies and programs certainly did have an effect on the development of arts in rural communities, more than anything, the growth of the field depended on an organic process of relationships, connectivity, and experimentation with new cultural ideas. Different authors explored different aspects of this history, together providing a complete picture of all the various forces at play.

The activities during first half of the 20th century were crucial in spreading an awareness and appreciation of arts and culture throughout America, including small and isolated communities, which had previously not been consciously exposed to the arts. There was a general suspicion of the arts, and maybe even an apathetic sensibility in many communities, especially among farmers. Beginning around 1915 a series of policy events, programs, and arts movements began to make space for arts and cultural activities in these communities, recognizing and activating local culture, and building stepping stones towards deeper appreciation and participation. The establishment of county agricultural agents, 4-H, and homemaker groups celebrated and supported rural culture and lifestyle. The lyceum speakers movement and chautauquas toured programs throughout the country that served as a stimulus for

self education and community improvement. The American Theatre Movement nurtured a new awareness of native arts, emphasizing homegrown culture as well as tolerance and the expansion of ideas. The Works Projects Administration (WPA) spread the growth of arts programming to every corner of the nation, generating greater arts exposure, even in small communities. And maybe most importantly, local arts agencies began to establish themselves in the 1940s, followed by state and regional councils and then the National Endowment for the Arts in 1965, completing a “continuum of support” that helped to legitimize and solidify a place for the arts in the hearts and minds of the American people. The decentralization of arts policy and support allowed for generation of higher level advocacy and resources, which then trickles down to the local level, but also more locally focused agencies that have deep connections to their communities. This history is not just a foundation for the arts in rural and small communities, but for local community arts in all contexts.

Local Arts Agencies

Articles throughout the book touched on local arts agencies and their capacities within communities. When looking at the connection of local arts agencies woven throughout the text, these agencies serve as major stakeholders to how arts integration is represented throughout communities. When looking at these agencies within communities, one needs to understand that cultural enrichment of community puts on several different lenses. Artists may inhabit small towns just as much as they would major metropolitan areas. Art has its place everywhere and within this theme comes the greater understanding and recurring theme throughout the book of art in the everyday.

Within the article *Art In the Heartlands*, Janet Brown, the executive director of South Dakotans for the Arts, talks about how “the origin of art lies in the creativity of the individual, not the institutions that surround them. The need for artistic expression is not an environmental one, but rather a basic human desire that crosses economic, cultural, racial and religious lines” (1992 p. 35). As community art practitioners, one realizes that community members are what make up the fibers of the local arts agencies. As community art managers, we thrive on the work that is able to create space for people to feel empowered towards transformational change.

When looking through the context of South Dakota Art Council, we begin to understand the framework of what rural arts environment looks like. As art administrators, our role is to assist these collectives who are inspired by the basic need and understanding to produce art in rural place. Driven by community needs and interests, the importance of quality of product versus the quality of process is what allows local arts agencies to create their programming and overall missions of intent. For example, the quality of a community driven theatre season may not be of high production value, but the process of community involvement in creating the production has high value and quality. These skills are birthed through the involvement of arts agencies within the community. They support unmeasurable assets, which is further explained through Danielle Withrow (1992), the president of Community Venture in her article “*Building Human Resource Capacity in Community Arts Agencies*”.

The assets that are unmeasurable are human assets. This article explores four areas of human resource assets and how they are invaluable to community art agencies (Withrow, 1992, pg. 41):

1. The human resource allocation in community arts agency

2. The importance of the citizen volunteer leadership and its relationship with the professional paid staff if it exists in the organization
3. The importance of the professional paid staff in building the capacity of volunteers
4. Shaping the human resources into an effective team with the organizational will to carry out the mission of the agency

Resources vary depending on the community arts agency. They are comprised of board members, committees and staff. Many agencies don't have paid staff, and some agencies function entirely on volunteer staff. When paid staff is present, the fine balance of finding committed volunteers allows for a dedication to mission and values, and it drives the very balance of volunteer and staff relations.

Community events may function entirely on volunteer staff, with a few paid staff present. A community organization with effective operation and dedication focuses on human assets through training and development. For example, if one looks at summer programming that is put on through Eugene, there is a dedicated team of paid staff and volunteers that have been given the opportunity to develop leadership skills as well as a clear sense of purpose with their overall operating skills. There becomes inherent value in teaching these assets to volunteers. These assets allow teams to work together under a clear sense of mission and purpose. It then drives the importance of arts and culture within the community. This can also be reflected within community arts within a rural context, as this book focuses much of its' attention on exploring and providing context of why community arts drives people closer to their inherent need to come together through shared vision and connectivity.

Community Arts in Rural Context

Through the various perspectives of seventeen contributors, the book established a context of American rural and small communities and the aspects of doing cultural work within those communities that are still fairly relevant today. Understanding the challenges facing these small and isolated communities and the context in which they exist provides reasoning for why the community arts are so essential. Many of the challenges and characteristics of rural communities find themselves manifested in other geographical contexts as well. Limited resources, isolation, lack of markets, lack of diversity, transforming economies, devotion to land and place can also be found in urban neighborhoods. These characteristics are commonly associated with rural, but they are not only of the rural. These are also places where isolation and “smallness” may help to preserve unique cultural identities, and encourage closeness among neighbors. Here community has a depth of importance, which becomes almost survivalist. We wonder of the value of community arts for rural people and what role it might play in building community. What purpose do the arts serve in rural and small communities? What is the role of administrators and cultural workers?

One of the most prominent discussions throughout *Grassroots and Mountain Wings* is the importance or value of arts and culture to rural communities. Four themes that appeared repeatedly were participation, process, social connectivity, and storytelling. In his article “Altering the Face and Heart of Rural America,” Robert Gard (1992, p. 13) states that the strength of America “is in the people, and that it lies in the places where people live. The people, if shown the way, can create art in and of themselves. The springs of the American people are at the grassroots.” This was such a key statement that really simplified the essence of community arts, especially in rural place, where the arts are even less tied to institutional structures and

instead are simply of and for the people. When the arts are so deeply connected to people and personal experience they becomes less about product and more about process. The art object has little value as an end result. It might only serve as a symbolic reminder of the more important process behind its being. Participation is a key part of process of course, and as discussed throughout the book, it is essential to community arts. Where art is not already rooted as part of the infrastructure of a community, it is the art experience that cultivates appreciation and support for the arts.

A product of participation, social connectivity was and continues to be an important part of community arts in rural places. In areas of isolated or small populations, people tend to have closer connections to their neighbors, and “community” takes on a deeper meaning imbued with reliance on one another and closeness of people and to land. In many cases, small towns do not provide many opportunities for organized fun and social gathering. Sometimes these arts activities and experiences might be the only thing to do, or might even be the only bright outlet for creativity in the community. Throughout the articles in *Grassroots and Mountain Wings*, ideas around imagination, creativity and joy are brought up often, emphasizing that the entry point for many people to the arts is often an arts experience that is fun and enjoyable.

Therefore, arts and culture activities are instrumental in creating contexts for people to come together, and especially important in creating opportunities to bring together different cultures and different generations, establishing a forum for a variety of views and perspectives. One of the articles brought up an interesting point that bringing different people together might be less about finding diversity and more about finding commonality. This was valuable because when engaging in discussions about diversity we tend to focus on the idea of bringing differences together and finding ways for people to better understand and acknowledge those

differences. This emphasis on finding commonality as human beings was a refreshing turn in a slightly different direction in the arts and diversity discussion. Through rediscovering our “humanness” we can connect on a deeper level with all people.

Another prominent idea throughout the book was the arts as a means for storytelling and defining identity and narrative. Unfortunately, many rural regions and communities have been plagued by stereotypes that shade them as forgotten and backwards, stuck in the past and tied to a stagnant rural idyll. This perception persisted not only from the outside but also within these communities, and it had an effect on how people thought of the arts. “For many of them, art and culture wasn’t something they had, it was something that had to be brought into their communities from those places that had it. This pattern of low self-image continues to plague many rural and small communities today (Overton, 1992, p. 32).”

With its deep ties to agriculture and the bedrock of American values, the rural is integral to American identity, yet at the same time it is forgotten. In this context of community identity and self-realization, the arts have the unique power to redefine this narrative, to celebrate values and culture, and help to wear down such stereotypes, recasting the rural as parallel, rather than in contrast to urban America. There was a consistent conversation throughout the articles about the strong connection of the arts to individual and community values. They are able to identify, celebrate, conserve and communicate these values, and therefore provide a unique and very effective method for establishing identity. These articles were commissioned during a time when rural communities were experiencing gradual but intense transitions away from traditional economic structures and ways of life as digital technology crept in and the world got smaller, transitioning from a local resource-based economy into a global knowledge-based economy. We are certainly still seeing this transition today, and also witnessing communities activate the arts

as a way of exploring the intersections of their historical roots and their contemporary existence. In this capacity, community arts become part of the the search for self-being and contextual understanding. As consistently mentioned throughout *Grassroots and Mountain Wings*, each community is unique, and each has its own story to tell. The arts provide a means to do so that not only engages people in the process of telling the story but tells it in such a way that can be experienced by all. By exploring story in our every, we begin to explore throughout the articles how community & self are interconnected, the arts serving as the filter for exposure to this idea of arts in the everyday.

Relationship to Community and Self

Grassroots and Mountain Wings was written during an era where art was not considered essential to the everyday identity. Opponents of the arts asked themselves if the United States should engage directly in federally funding arts and learning. Should tax dollars be used to subsidize arts? Proponents believed that arts funded by government agency became a threat to American democracy, a body of work or project funded by government agency could lead to fascism upheavals or even worse, communism!

Exactly the opposite is true. Within the beginnings of the book, Robert Gard (1992, pg. 13) states “in terms of American democracy, the arts are for everyone.” This is looking beyond governance, it is built from the ground up, as a grassroots movement. Why should we care about having art within our communities? Art brings different emotions and experiences of our own identity, it provides a technicolor lense to our past, present and future experiences. Artists create content, elucidate, and allow those who experience their art to relate and connect in a multitude

of mediums. The spirit of art comes through and interacts with the community, bringing people out of their daily routine and into deeper self-exploration and discovery.

The spirit of community arts is reflected throughout the book as authors reflect on communities that desire something beyond the daily routine, beyond the daily grind of life. Art allows for this within glimpses or long periods of time. Community arts organizations bring stewardship of the spirit of art and of the art administrator. Art administrators look towards facilitation, sharing, and offering support in ways to participate and experience the work of artists because we believe that art impacts lives. We seek to connect artists with communities, and individuals within communities to art within their everyday lives.

Grassroots and Mountain Wings brings about the spiritual importance of art, that may be considered to some as overly esoteric. Art invokes in us something that can never be fully defined and throughout all the articles, authors realize that art cannot be ignored or avoided because it is essential to our humanness. Davina Grace Hill (1992, pg. 95), the executive director of Salisubry Wicomico Arts Council, writes eloquently in her piece “Pathways Found, and Pathway Sought,” of the how why we value arts is through our desire to quest: “We seek answers to what we don’t understand, we question what others think they know, and once we believe in something, we proselytize to convince others of our beliefs and the validity of the answers we have found on our quest. And from the very first, the arts have played a central role in that quest.” Looking within history of art tracking back to cave paintings of France, the craftsmanship from ancient native groups of people that created art such as instruments or tools, we see art playing a central role of influence. Communities help direct how this role of art within the community can be affected by the work that art administrators do. This is reflected on the priorities of artistic practice and expression in communities, and how art is defined within our

given communities. This very question of “What is Art?” comes throughout the course of our curriculum within Community Arts Management, and is woven throughout many of the classes through the Arts Administration Program.

Hill speaks clearly on not shying away from this overbearing question of what is art, and leaves the responsibility to those who participate in the notion that art is part of self-expression. Ways that this can be approached is through celebrating the successes within the arts and bringing value through community support, collaboration, and the power of spreading these achievements through transmedia avenues. Media allows for more opportunity for both urban and rural communities to provide “linkage”. Programs such as the Kentucky Rural-Urban Exchange organized by Appalshop and Art In The Rural, utilizes technology that supports in ways for individuals to advocate for increased awareness of the arts through community circles. These circles connect together different regions of Kentucky on the common ground of creating partnerships for a shared social and economic future. The importance of art is reclaimed through their cultural identity and narrative of community. Through helping individuals craft their story of their cultural history, a sense of empowerment and creative pride is realized, and further drives the project home.

The Grassroots and Mountain Wings Symposium in the early nineties brought together a unique group of influential community arts scholars, practitioners, and policy-makers who created a discussion about community arts in a rural context that not only speaks across geographic boundaries but maintains relevance throughout all of community arts, even through present day. The continuation of many themes throughout the articles clearly demonstrates the development of a shared language and common practice. While it has a clear focus on rural and

small communities, the book explores concepts from varying perspectives that are instrumental to community arts in any context.

References

Brown. (1992). *Art In the Heartlands-A view of rural local art councils*. Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities. Columbia: Columbia College. p. 53.

Gard, R. (1992). *Altering the face and heart of America: gaining a sensibility for rural arts*. Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities. Columbia: Columbia College. p. 13.

Overton, P. (1992) *Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities*. Columbia: Columbia College.

Overton, P. (1992). *Remembering the story - reclaiming the roots: A brief historical overview of community cultural development in rural and small communities*. Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities. Columbia: Columbia College. p. 32.

Brown. (1992). *Art In the Heartlands-A view of rural local art councils*. Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities. Columbia: Columbia College. p. 53.

Hill. (1992). *Pathways Found, and Pathways Sought*. Grassroots and mountain wings: the arts in rural and small communities. Columbia: Columbia College. P. 105

Musical Influences (during the writing process)

Charley Pride, *Is anybody goin' to San Antone*

Corb Lund, *Cows Around*

Merle Haggard, *Okie from Muskogee*

RL Burnside, "It's bad you know", *Come On In* Album, 2009

Trevor Hall, *KALA*, 2015

The Verve, *Urban Hymns*, 1997