The arts have been an exclusive practice that presents objects in a safe setting, wrenched free from context. The presentation of pure forms colonizes objects in a Western way, like how a curio cabinet of conquered tribal relics lacks the backstory of their origins and uses. This decontextualization of beauty by an elite few is intrinsically violent. Limiting context narrows our external horizons, and thus confines the possible perceptions we can have. The following is a consideration for a humbling shift in the arts, off the pedestal and down to earth. A shift in two ways—first, greater inclusivity of diverse aesthetic approaches by individuals without traditional formal training; second, more grounding into the intricacies of the local context in which work is generated.

Instead of asserting our perspective as absolute, we can welcome the unknown and seek diversity. By grounding ourselves within community and landscape in a way that values it as a field of relationships that includes others, nonhuman elements as much as people, we can expand our selfhood. Our understanding is shaped by the experience of our environment; however, many of our institutions such as schools, workplaces, and arts institutions, often don’t allow individuals to emotionally and cognitively engage in any robust way.

One major cause of exclusivity is that art depends upon an institutional framework that certifies its participants; sadly, however, not everybody has access to this schooling. This structure is inherently tragic—even work that is critical of the elitist system that encompasses art must be, to a degree, reinserted into this system (e.g. through exhibitions), which ironically reinforces the institution’s deeply entrenched exclusion for all those who were not credentialed in art. And so, participation becomes a catch 22—where even the act of trying to make art inclusive actually intensifies exclusivity.

Suppression of diversity creates a widespread mindset in which people who are prevented by the institutional framework from participating actually come to believe the institution’s oppressive opinions. I hear people say all the time, “I’m not
creative,” “I can’t make things,” and thus, they don’t try; this perception becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that continues to make art even less inclusive. While there is an assumption that only a refined few have the low-down on beauty, even the United States’ founding fathers gave a nod to their conception of the arts for every citizen. For John Adams, the ultimate goal of education in a free society was to provide an opportunity to appreciate and participate in the arts.¹

At the 2014 College Art Association Conference in New York, I had the pleasure of serving on an eco-art panel with Linda Weintraub who highlighted the absurdity of requiring materials in art courses. We can instead be enchanted with mud, microbes, contaminants, and electronics as being equally valuable, or more so, as any traditional art material. Weintraub advocated for art that is a mission, not a style, with practitioners sensitive to context and collective relationships.²

This shift in approach to the relationship with land and community is paradoxical: by asserting more space for individuals, and thus the unknown, we strengthen the community as a whole. Emile Durkheim wrote of social solidarity engendered through the sacredness of individuality. Aristotle similarly worried about repressive unity, and considered the city to be a synoikismos, an attraction of people from diverse family tribes—each oikos having its own loyalties, possessions, and family gods.³

Art is agonistic; there are always boundaries from which sides will interpret and react differently. Igneous rocks are similarly heterogeneous; as with granite, it is the interlocking of diverse crystals that provides its superior strength. Like a strong grip, the hand doing the touching is also being touched—it is both sensor and connector. When a sculptor pushes material, that material pushes back in a form of co-creation. The sculptor’s exploratory pushing into varying contexts creates ramifications, ramifications that also push. The projects described throughout this paper have served as strategies for doing things differently by not assuming that I know what’s best because I was taught the right knowledge. They involve collaborating in communities with untrained artists and generating new relationships with land.

1. Becoming Piano

Habermas writes that in Western societies, music existed to enhance private social functions for the elite until the late 18th century when the Collegia Musica emerged and made music public, untied from specific purposes.⁴ It is in positioning myself in the community and landscape, outside of an exclusive venue, that I introduce Becoming Piano, executed with the support of a 2010 Sculpture Space residency in Utica, New York.

Before I arrived, I planned to obtain access to a grand piano, cover the keys with clay, and have a noted classical pianist play in a regal auditorium. I’d obsessively tried to reach two-time Grammy-winning, classically trained pianist Peter Serkin, to play an ethereal and elevating late-Romantic piece. I was like an overly zealous Lady Gaga groupie, but in the wrong world; and I included all these correspondence attempts, as well as his single hand-written decline, in exhibitions of this project.

Once rejected, I turned my attention to Utica and its residents. I learned that the city was once an industrial hub with over 100,000 people, but, over the decades, big companies pulled out, a nearby Air Force base closed, ultimately leaving a population of only 60,000. The city is struggling, but it’s unique because immigrants have found it an attractive place to start. With its Arab, Bosnian, Dominican, Polish and Russian communities, Utica has the fourth largest concentration of immigrants of any U.S. city. I realized my original vision would have excluded those people—they probably don’t frequent the gilded Stanley Center for the Arts.
As I got more involved in the project I found it was necessary to be more pragmatic. An early Greek understanding of this word means inserting space for the illogical as a way to move forward - if you had an idea, put it in play and see what happens. I obtained a piano free of charge from Utica’s Stage Music & Sound shop. The instrument had been rescued from a chimney collapse and, although mostly tuned, was deemed unfit for sale due to soot damage. Oddly enough, this unique history with fire became the refrain as the project unfolded into unforeseen territories of the local area.

I engaged in a repeated process of covering this piano’s keys with sets of soft, hand-sculpted porcelain keys. I wheeled the piano around the community, and allowed bystanders to play until the keys were fused together, as if melted. I then peeled the clay keys off at the studio and replaced them with a new covering of clay, so that I could begin the process again. By getting out of the studio and into the community I connected with people I otherwise wouldn’t have met.

A single set of keys is fragile and thin, but as residents produced fresh recordings, I pressed them into the previous sets, until they accumulated into a monolith that held itself together. I culminated the project with a bisque firing, in a rock quarry on a Utica farm, in which the piano was ceremoniously sacrificed as fuel to fire the keys solidly together, creating an incongruity that gave music’s transitory nature a bold permanence. The earthen clay keys, vestiges of the residents’ recordings, provided a new perspective on piano playing: fused together in a cacophony, each key could no longer offer up the unique musical contribution that is made when it is struck and let go.

I’m glad to say the project has a happy ending—I found my classical pianist in a sketchy area of town. One sweltering afternoon, next to an expressway exit wall spray-painted with an ironic “Sing Your Melodies”, a teenage girl schooled me in how to play Debussy’s Clair de Lune.
One value that upheld throughout the project was cherishing craft as more than finely honed technique; craft became a disposition towards unique expression. As Matthew Friday and his SUNY New Paltz students eloquently write in their craft manifesto, “…unlike the modernist myth of autonomous art, craft has no pretense of standing apart from the world.” It doesn’t need to be in a gallery. It’s uniquely related to the body, and touch, and has a long tradition of existing in gifting economies, outside of market forces. Craft’s strength is the manifesting of community. In this project, our piano playing fostered connections with others, and the Uticans’ touch was captured and cherished in the finest local porcelain.

2. Tarp Lake

In 2012, I created an exhibit called Tarp Lake, in collaboration with artist Heidi Bender. Tarp Lake is an artificial lake landscape made of billowing blue tarps that had been donated or cast-off. This exhibition was erected on the grounds of an old textile mill in Huntsville, Alabama, which produced the boots used by U.S. soldiers in Vietnam in the 1970s. It’s now a low-income area. The lake is supported on wooden scaffolding, and its movement in the wind mimics waves. The transcripts of interviews from tarp donors are published into booklets that are available in kiosks that are positioned throughout the lake, giving the piece a poetic sensibility and inviting audiences to the varying depths of the undersides, where the tarps filter and provide shade from the sunlight, homogenizing the landscape with a blue tint. At odds with its playful spectacle however, Tarp Lake not only masks natural ecologies in order to form a modern version of paradise, it also creates a simulation that fools our mapping technologies. The lake creates a conflicted space for two reasons. First, it is simultaneously artificial and authentic; it is made of unnatural plastic yet intimate traces of the tarps’ previous lives, such as mud from a colonial archaeological dig or grease from spent farm equipment, are etched into them. The second and more powerful conflict is that these rugged, discarded tarps, consolidated into a lake that was designed to protect the audience, are symbolic of any lake’s ephemeral feature.

We received tarps that were used to shield or maintain things. When the tarps are cast off, the objects they had safeguarded are exposed to the weather, grime and abrasion of time. The objects begin their journey to a modern day ruin, a place where nature resets itself over humanity’s concrete detritus. These cast-off tarps become synonymous with the point at which we begin to let things decay, when our desire is spent and we stop maintaining a small portion of the built landscape. The lake providing protection is deeply symbolic of the impermanence of that very protection. While bathed in the tarps’ healing blue light, the lakebed seems to chime in that its life too is transient.
To learn of a community’s memories, attendees could walk amongst the tarps with a booklet explaining what donors had been protecting and how these objects ultimately succumbed to time and weather. This aspect of the installation is partly inspired by the Jungian concept *circumambulate*—to walk around something in order to open ourselves to other perspectives. The lake was also a venue for small community gathering—underneath the higher tarps (symbolic of the lake’s deeper water) we had chairs with beverages to facilitate discussion about clinging to the material. In line with this, Habermas writes on the public sphere about how some 17th century coffee houses in England became places where people of all levels of society could talk about pressing issues at the time. One of the more famous ones was Button’s Coffee House. Public conversation there would be transcribed onto paper and thrown through the jaws of a lion’s head installed on the wall, to be included in The Guardian newspaper. The lion’s head was designed after the Lion of Venice, “A proper emblem of knowledge and action, being all head and paws.” This inclusiveness of representation can be a useful tactic in shattering elitism.

At the core of Tarp Lake was kind of a sympathetic magic—situated in this urban concrete landscape was a synthetic blue mass that looked like a lake—the wind passing through the tarps made roaring waves. People would relax, look out and meditate. Even though it was just a superficial appearance of a lake, it was mesmerizing. Art has the power to impact people’s experiences of an environment, and the attendant memories. What makes art unique—from, say, math or science—is that work doesn’t have to be real. It can be a fake lake, yet still establish a powerful sense of place. Niels Bohr, a Danish physicist who won the Nobel Prize for quantum theory, speaking in 1924 at Kronborg Castle in Denmark, was remarking about how strange it was that scientists believe a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together, but once you know that Kronborg is Hamlet’s Elsinore Castle it becomes a very different place. On their tour, the scientists couldn’t help but imagine the adultery, murder, and the tortured prince lurking in the shadows and seeking justice. Hamlet might be a fictional character, nobody knows if there was actually a real prince, so artists might be engaged in their own place-making. I’m interested in how art, or any means of producing thought, can be used as a way to actively invent the world in which I live. An artist can walk the boundary between the real and the imaginary, and erase the distinction along the way.

Our tarps had traces of their previous uses. In Tibetan, shul means a mark remaining after that which made it has passed—such as an indentation in the grass from a sleeping fawn or a building footprint. We need to examine the value in understanding our artifacts and landscapes as shul—as having been occupied by others. The tarps bore evidence of individual longings and significance and, in their collectivity, imprinted a new shul on the ground.

Areas that are ripe for art, rich in context and collaboration, are urban areas in transition. Rust can have a function—to decay, making room for something other. But when large industries pull out of cities leaving rust belts, that culture can be on the brink of oblivion, or conversely, poised for mindfully integrated transformation. Casinos move in, providing patrons with escape, and manage employees with a relatively new phenomenon called speed-up—supervisors watch more tables and servers wait on more customers. It’s an industry reliant on part-time labor, employees struggle with three jobs to make ends meet. With this model, there’s no time or interest in reflecting on the past.

Even though an industry leaves, its effects resound...
The authentic transformation of our communities, rust belt areas in particular, involves more than rebuilding on the tabula rasa of a topography; rather, rebuilding requires the conscientious internalization of cultural differences that are only discoverable through sincere dialogue. Reconstructions that recognize and integrate an area’s rich history can serve as opportunities for reflecting on and honoring cultural memory. Artistic practice can be a tool for uncovering collective memories and their companion emotions.

3. The Rat’s Nest

I worked on The Rat’s Nest in Dayton, Ohio in 2011 through The Blue Sky Project, an artist residency enabling emerging artists to work for two months with a group of high school students, culminating with an exhibition.

For Erving Goffman, people’s identity is performed, and these performances shift as we segregate our audience. Goffman writes that we create a mask for our interactions, and these masks are our truer selves because they are the selves we are striving to become. I had to consider how I would interact with this new Dayton community, and what masks I should wear while performing my new identities. Pragmatist John Dewey might call this living forwards.

I had proposed to use the Surrealist’s exquisite corpse technique to create giant, absurd, wearable wigs to be paraded around town as a springboard into collaborative fun. Exquisite corpse engages multiple participants in generating a single composition, each unaware of the work contributed by the other partners. The resulting composite forms a hybrid body.

The Blue Sky participants and I called our shop The Rat’s Nest, Big Wigs for All Occasions, and it was located on the lobby level of a largely empty skyscraper in the heart of downtown. We created a welcoming space. Patrons and employees of local businesses, commuters, some homeless, would draw with us and then we would build their designs, invite the community to get their heads fitted, join for an afternoon tea ceremony, or look for us at the local barbershops, which we frequented with our hybrid buzz-clipper-markers to purchase haircut drawings in place of actual buzz-cuts. Throughout Homer’s writing, hospitality is pervasive throughout the Greek civilization. Travelling was often perilous, and if strangers knocked on your door, it was customary to invite them to sit by the fire, shower them with gifts, food, wine, and genuinely inquire about their troubles and concerns. It is this sense of sharing that inspired The Rat’s Nest moving away from the sculpted object, real substance lies in our interactivity with others.

I had proposed to use the

Artists frequently admit they don’t have a viewer in mind while making things at the studio, that they only produce for themselves. But one’s self is the construct of a collectivity that has influenced one’s values. Hairstyles speak volumes about cultural values. This project stimulated dialogue between
Blue Sky participants and the Dayton community, and synthesized this collected information—we didn’t create ex nihilo. We studied the cant of people’s professions—how they present themselves in their daily routines; then our project broke these conventional social codes in order to become more expressive of the participants’ values and sense of play.

When we’re young we usually experiment with our identity and then rigidify around our conditioning as we mature, yet this project is about breaking through that inflexibility. First, we had to be willing to criticize our own tastes and explore how styles were provincial and temporary. For example, in the late 18th century it was common practice by French and English women to dye their hair blue, coiffure it into large waves, and embed model ships to commemorate naval victories—such over the top coiffs were a passing fad. Similarly, our identities don’t need to be fixed; instead, our lavish designs included: a wig of hands that bind hair firmly in place; a blonde wig shelving unit with cardboard boxes to compartmentalize thoughts, bulging boxes containing pressing secrets; a tuba with too many tubes entangling the player; and a voxel (volumetric pixel element used in video games) wig.
In this collaborative project with artist Nate Lareau, we donned fugitive-like orange and white striped suits to resemble radio towers and ensure safety from hunters as we self-broadcast through a police bullhorn. We were equipped with custom-made harnesses that supported a thousand feet of cable, allowing us to form a nomadic zipline that easily fastened to our torsos or tree trunks without damaging the environment. In multiple iterations, we explored the effect of landscape on sound by sending the bullhorn, playing at full volume, down this zipline from one location to another as a way to use sound to define those places, and collectively generate an acoustic map of the landscape.

As sculptors, we were interested in treating sound as a tangible material despite its fleeting nature, and in introducing our bullhorn as a whimsically foreign and manmade object on the rugged natural environment. The zipline allowed the bullhorn to span “hollers” and travel amongst rock walls, letting us explore how pitch is affected by the different confines and contours of the landscape, and the resulting flow of the wind. Our process also afforded us the opportunity to capture the Doppler effect as the sound traveled fluidly past audio/video recording devices. We choreographed the footage so that different locations play simultaneously—such as footage from the Colorado Rockies, the Moab Desert in Utah, an Appalachian waterfall, an Alabama city, a limestone quarry—harmonizing the country’s natural and urban landscapes.

With this project, we eschewed the security of a museum space, in order to lose ourselves in geography. Rebecca Solnit describes the origin of the word “lost” coming from los in Old Norse—the disbanding of an army—that suggests soldiers leaving formation in a truce with the wide, uncertain, world. I now worry that many people never disband their art traditions, never go beyond the familiar, and never embrace mystery.

5. H.M.S. Hydra

In the summer of 2014, I was in New York, near Lake Cazenovia which, along with many of the Finger Lakes, was invaded by Eurasian Milfoil—an aquatic plant species threatening lake health. The villainized milfoil grows as a vine, forming a thick carpet on lake-surfaces, suffocating other species, and disrupting habitat equilibrium. It is commonly proliferated by boat propellers that chop and transport it; and then these stem fragments grow into new plants. Communities pump millions of dollars towards solutions—from dousing with...
herbicides or extracting by hand with scuba divers, to mowing with hybrid weedwacker-boats that bail the harvest on deck, haul it by the ton to the city dump to decompose for a year, where afterwards it can be used as soil fertilizer.

When I moved to Topeka, Kansas, I learned Eurasian Milfoil had invaded Lake Shawnee, and herbicides were being used to keep it at bay. With this project, I’m proposing an alternative—to treat this menace as something productive. To help clean the invaded water, I’m carefully collecting the weed to be used as fiber, which, when hermetically sealed in resin, I’ll use to build a flat-bottomed trolling motorboat that runs on distilled milfoil ethanol.

Much research shows no permanent solution for milfoil eradication; there will always be sustained conflict. This helps me to reframe this milfoil invasion as a challenging gift that encourages us to think and evolve, and a reminder to consider the impacts of our solutions. My solution is hydra-headed. In using a motorboat, I’m potentially amplifying the problem by generating stem fragments that can rapidly accelerate the spread of the species, which, however, will be good for my boat-making business.

This year I taught a 2D Design course, where instead of dealing with a tangible material, let’s say mud, we had to make a graphic representation, or symbol, of that material—it’s something altogether different, a step removed. The same holds true for courses such as painting, photography, and sculpture. Alan Watts wrote, “I am amazed that Congressmen can pass a bill imposing severe penalties on anyone who burns the American flag, whereas they are responsible for burning that for which the flag stands: the United States as a territory, as a people, and as a biological manifestation. That is an example of our perennial confusion of symbols with realities.”

Gradually, though, academic curricula are broadening their scope and expanded practice is becoming more widespread. I’m researching ways of using this milfoil with Washburn University students, in tandem with the Mulvane Art Museum. From an educator’s perspective, I can see that change in our discipline is slow. Changing our institutions, our art museums, our schools, takes time. Richard Clark from USC, for example, has shown that results from lab research, “requires about one generation—about 20 years—to find its way into practice. This has been the case with everything from diet and smoking to the studies of mathematics and information science…” The arts need a hastening patience to cherish our collective relationships; this can only happen if we ordain zones that accommodate plurality. Millennials can welcome revolutionary change, with collaborative, team-based approaches, that can form highly interactive alliances to transfigure our future in new ways.
Conclusion

With these projects, I’m thinking of art as not separate from geology and community, locked up with guards in a cube; rather, I see art as a rupture when unforgiving circumstances exert enough force to trigger reactions—when fissures open to welcome differences. Perhaps art is geology, at its most free—fracturing, melding and erupting—even free from itself, for art blindly attached to tradition reinforces exclusivity.

I currently teach at Washburn University, and over half of my students identify as non-white or multi-racial. Many methods in which art is traditionally taught would exclude my students’ concerns and personal sense of aesthetics. This compounds even more on a national scale—every year in the United States alone, one million students graduate with an arts-related B.F.A., M.F.A., or P.h.D. The existing traditional art world fails to accommodate this emerging talent. In regards to sex, there’s a vast discrepancy between male and female artists who have commercial gallery representation in the United States—the national average reveals that the latter are far outnumbered at 30% to 70%.

Vilém Flusser writes that a utopia in which everything is the same results in the concentration camp, that we must always be conscious of this inherent tendency within the Western Project, or else it will repeat itself. There is instead a benefit to allowing for crisis, flexibility and critique—the increase of our field of possible experiences, a different participation in this great ephemeral Experiment (Life). This is only achievable after the recognition, then lift, of severely subjugating barriers.

REFERENCES


[7] Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 42.

[8] Ibid., 42.


[12] One tarp was donated by an individual who could no longer use it to protect her porch while practicing ceramics because her neighborhood Home Owners Association deemed blue tarps an “eyesore.” Places that seem neutral - a sidewalk, a lawn, a subdivision, a shopping mall - are highly codified. For example, in 1868, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted designed one of Chicago’s first suburban communities, and set in place the rules for front yards—there must be a 30 foot gap between each house and the road, and hedges and walls were banned, otherwise it’d be too emblematic of European properties which were solitary, looked like insane asylums, and were owned by petty individualists. On the contrary, the American front garden would be a unified expanse, egalitarian, and liberated from European values. I learned about this history of the United States’ landscape in Richard Mabey’s book Weeds: In Defense of Nature’s Most Unloved Plants (2011).


