

Interdisciplinary Arts and Cultural Innovation:

Merging Journalism with Visual Art Curation and Presentation

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SIEC Conference, Belo Horizonte, June 26-7, 2022

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For most of two decades, I have focused my research as an economist and public policy professor on the occupational structure of regional and local economies. I argue that the predominant reliance on an industry lens in describing and analyzing distinctive local and regional economies does not give due credit to the nature of the workforce, its composition, and the institutions, including universities, that foster its development. Over the past two decades, I have published dozens of journal articles using an occupational rather than an industrial framework. I have also published papers investigating the relationship between occupation and industrial structure in regional and local economies. In the bibliography attached, I include citations to my published articles and studies that focus on artists as an occupational group.

In this paper, I present an in-depth case study of an interdisciplinary innovation in which I am a founding partner, investor, writer and art curator. In recent years, weekly newspapers in both large and small cities in our state and region (Minnesota, USA) have been purchased and eviscerated by a communications company, Forum Communications, owned by a rich and conservative family from another state. In the fall of 2006, Forum bought out the Duluth News Tribune (DNT), a seven-days-a-week daily, serving the second largest city in our state of Minnesota. The purchase included the *Pine Knot*, the historic Cloquet, Minnesota, weekly newspaper. Forum subsequently changed the *Pine Knot* name to the *Pine Journal*. In 2018, Forum closed its downtown Cloquet office and required its editor, Jana Peterson, to work from home and/or travel to the DNT offices in downtown Duluth.

Following the Closure, the staff were required to work from home or drive an hour round trip to Duluth. Editor Peterson purchased the rights to the *Pine Knot* name, rented the historic PK office quarters on Cloquet's historic main street that had been shuttered for some time, and recruited four of us - a competent office manager, the owner of another area weekly in the county, a local lawyer

known for hosting radio and TV shows dedicated to area issues, and myself, an Emerita Professor of Economics and Public Policy -- to consider and invest in the revival of the *Pine Knot*. We imagined together how we could operate as owners. We planned to develop expertise in subscriptions, advertising, writing, opinion, photography, investigative journalism, coverage of area schools and sports and cultural activities, layout, printing and weekly distribution. It was a challenging agenda, but we all pitched in, hired an excellent ad man, and some months later, an outstanding and experienced newspaper man for layout and editing.

Peterson's years of working for the Pine Journal as its both its editor and key reporter brought invaluable knowledge to our team. We hired a seasoned advertising man, since our ability to cover our costs relied heavily on advertising as well as subscriptions. Over the next few months, we furnished our offices with desks, tables, chairs, lamps, filing cabinets – items often brought from our homes. Peterson, with some help from the rest of us, recruited columnists – some writing about their towns and schools spread across the region, others working as sports writers and photographers, still others covering controversial issues such as the huge Enbridge oil pipeline being laid underground across northern Minnesota to ship Canadian tar sand oils to ports on the Great Lakes, the subject of considerable on-site protests by Native Americans and environmentalists in our region.

Opinion columns were welcome from the start, often prompting others to write responses to be published the following week. Most weeks, I wrote about economics, especially during the Covid disruption: how small businesses survived, how the government's initial programs to discourage layoffs worked for owners and workers, how the health care sector was coping with both the threat of infection and the mission to care for those who fell ill.

We began publishing and distributing a weekly Pine Knot of twenty to twenty-four pages in the fall of 2018. The *Pine Knot* serves the Minnesota (USA) county, Carlton, of 36,400 residents. (The state's current population is 5.6 million.) Carlton County and its major city, Cloquet, are less than thirty-minute's drive from Duluth, Minnesota, the second-largest city in the state and the westernmost international port on the Great Lakes (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Carlton County, Minnesota, USA

We also distribute the *Pine Knot* to people living outside of our county who want to stay informed about area politics, economics and culture. In both 2021 and 2022, the *Pine Knot* was deemed the “Most Outstanding Weekly” newspaper in Minnesota by the Minnesota Newspaper Association, based on the quality of our news coverage, excellent investigative reporting, opinion columns by diverse community members, superior design and robust advertising.

Our editor, Jana Peterson, is an award-winning journalist with a strong commitment to investigative reporting. She has consistently informed the public and our political leaders about leadership failures as well as successes, serious pollution issues resulting from poor governmental oversight, school board issues, police malfeasance, competitive races for our state’s legislature, and major issues for the region. For instance, she is currently writing about ownership and use issues regarding a large nearby forest preserve owned by the University of Minnesota but historically belonging to our well-governed and prosperous, thanks to its successful casino, Fond du Lac Reservation. Fond du Lac leaders wish to regain possession and use of the Preserve.

Organizing the *Pine Knot* Gallery

One day, during one of our early organizing sessions, I gazed at the 100-year-old multi-colored brick wall running the length of our shot-gun style offices and blurted out, “This wall would make a wonderful art gallery.” “Who would do that?” one of our partners asked. “I would, I said.” For more than a decade, I had been studying artists as a case study in thinking about economic development and employment with an occupational lens in addition to using industrial structure. (References here). My case study occupation, almost accidentally, involved artists and the organizations that foster their development and economic success. I wrote, often with my graduate students, several primary studies of what we called “Artists’ Center” spaces developed either to serve artists by discipline or, mostly in smaller cities and suburbs, artists in general and their publics (citations here). I also co-authored a study of Native American artists in our state, not just visual artists but also writers, musicians, and theatre artists.

It was not difficult to reach artists in our region by email. I had already given several region-wide talks about the importance of art and culture to our regional economy and how to provide support to artists, a key occupational group in our region. The voters of our state, Minnesota, passed a constitutional amendment more than twenty years ago that instituted a new statewide sales tax, the proceeds from which were divided equally among nonprofits serving the arts, the environment, and wildlife (aka hunting), the three constituencies that had spearheaded the effort in our state legislature. The voters of Minnesota passed this constitutional amendment which provided for two decades of financing from a modest increase in the statewide sales tax. I had done a lot of work with the arts community, both statewide and locally, and I knew how to script a call for artists. I leaned heavily on two artists I knew – one the Executive Director of the Duluth Art Institute and the other a local artist who had been a high school art teacher and whose works I admired and had purchased from exhibits in our region. They became my closet advisors.

Celebrating the Artists

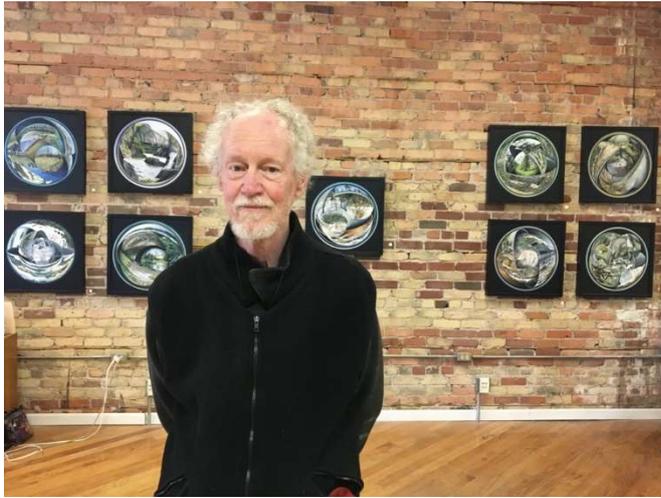
During our first few exhibits, artworks were hung for two-month periods and open to all visitors during our normal, 40-hour work week. Each artwork was accompanied by a card pinned to the brick wall that identified the artist, whether the work was for sale or not, and if so, at what price. I interviewed and wrote about each exhibitor for the *Pine Knot*, which helped amplify attendance. We held a well-advertised, after-work-hours opening for each exhibit, with refreshments. With solo artists, we ask them to speak about their work and to answer questions from those present.

The images embedded here show some of our first solo show exhibitors. In the first of these, Ojibwe artist Karen Savage Blue answers a participant’s question about her images and uses of color. Blue teaches art at one of the Fond du Lac schools. Her paintings use distinctive colors to convey the embeddedness of Native people in their environments, often with humor.



Ojibwe artist Karen Savage Blue, August 20, 2018

Another early exhibit showcased the work of Ken Hanson, an area artist who taught art in a Duluth public school for years. He takes photos of landscapes, pins the prints on a large board and juxtaposing features drawn from them on canvas with paints. Many are nature scenes (left below). Others show urban settings, such as his painting of Union Square in New York City.



We are delighted with the exposure we offer our exhibiting artists. We also welcome visitors at any time to drop in during our working hours. We have sold some artworks, at the price offered by the artist(s), but not enough to compensate for the quality and care put into them. However, some have reported follow-on exhibition opportunities generated by our exhibit.

After the first few exhibits, our calls for entries drew so many responses that we began to pair artists. We sometimes organized group shows. In one of our largest, fourteen artists contributed works that depict birds. They stretched across a variety of genres, from watercolors to acrylic to oils, photographs, wood carvings, and more. Held during the summer months before Covid appeared, this was the liveliest of our openings. Especially heartening were the ways in which the exhibiting artists gazed at and shared their thoughts on each others' work. Before Covid, we also hosted Christmastime exhibits with opportunities for children to draw in pencil or watercolor on paper during the reception.

Recently, we issued a call for portrait art. We were surprised to receive some remarkable photographs, which we had not anticipated. Ivy Vainio, a Native American photographer and curator, offered a series of photo portraits of Anishanaabe elders who were dear to her. In addition to those shown here, she had photographed one of our most prolific and accomplished artists, Carl Gawboy, who

organized, some thirty years ago, an Ojibwe art exhibit that travelled around Minnesota and adjoining states.



Virgil Sohm by Ivy Vainio



Carl Gawboy, by Ivy Vainio

Many other area artists contributing to this exhibit. Kris Nelson, locally known as “the chair lady,” paints vintage chairs with acrylics depicting themes that vary from children playing to electric chairs. In another example, I lent, with the artist’s permission, our exhibit a portrait of my Danish grandfather as an elder, painted by a friend of the family who had gifted it to me. It is, as are most of the other portraits, “not for sale.”

The Roundabouts

After the first few exhibits, four other arts-related organizations that curate gallery spaces approached us to consider expanding to “roundabouts:” openings staged on the same day, same time periods, so that visitors could circulate among them. This worked well. It created considerable “buzz” as people arrive, greet friends and acquaintances, and speak about the other venues they had visited. These include a recently-opened café in a neighboring town with a revolving art exhibit. A local theatre

company that curates an art gallery in its mingling area, available for viewing before and after shows and during intermissions. In a beautiful vintage home, a couple who relocated from the big cities transformed its first floor into a jazz performance and dining space, with a garden that often serves as a wedding or fund-raising venue. The roundabouts prompted more foot traffic for all the arts spaces involved and increased the number of artworks sold. It also offered artists ample opportunities to meet each other and to learn from others' creativity and methods.

The Covid pandemic prompted alterations in ours and our fellow organizations' openings. We dispensed with refreshments for a number of months, though we ordered high quality cookies, wrapped, that people could take home. We required masks and wore them ourselves.

Summary: Embedding Artworks and Performance in Multi-Purpose Spaces

As a culture "vulture," as we like to joke in English, I have always preferred theatre to other performance and exhibition genres. But being drafted to develop and curate an art gallery has been an eye-opening experience. For one thing, because I help hang each show and converse with the artist(s) while doing so, I learn a lot about visual art, compensating for an education that was rich in music, literature, and theatre but devoid of drawing and painting. As a result, I've become more interested in visual art and have enhanced my own collection of works.

The more important outcomes generated by our Pine Knot Gallery and those of our roundabout partners go beyond our ability to exhibit, offer a speaking platform, and generate income for area artists. Our gallery and newspaper office have sparked a revitalization of the historic downtown in Cloquet, our county's largest city. With the help of "Main Street" initiatives at the federal and state levels, the arts leaders in our community – those who own and run or curate arts exhibition spaces – have prompted an expansion in appreciation for the arts and an uptick in arts literacy as well as in pure and thought-provoking enjoyment for our extended constituencies. They have helped us sell subscriptions to the Pine Knot. They have exposed other artists and as well as visitors to quality work in various media and style and size. But above all, they have offered area artists opportunities to exhibit, speak about, engage with audiences and sell their work.

I offer this case study to this international community of cultural economists, hoping to learn from you about experiments in arts education and in showcasing artists' works in other countries and communities. The compartmentalization of academia into pods of expertise has made it particularly hard for social scientists and policy scholars to learn about, feel comfortable with, and support the many forms of artistic expression and related research taught on our campuses. Imagine the power and insights of courses that would encompass artistic skill and art history combined with, for instance, economic theory, methods and history, or city and regional planning. In the real world, as my modest examples demonstrate, crossing disciplinary and institutional boundaries can often accelerate learning and innovation, as well as bring ideas, challenges, even joy to participants, whether they be staff, writers, visitors or the artists themselves.

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