"A lot of people have this attitude about rural spaces that culture doesn't exist there, that for some reason these artists are the people who are bringing the culture to the region. Of course, it couldn't be further from the truth. What our work is about and what these artists are doing there is really enriching the culture that is already in place there." – Richard Saxton

As Bob Dylan famously sang, "the times they are a-changin," a sentiment that seems particularly apt in rural America. As more and more Americans flock to cities, the bucolic becomes harder to find thanks to ongoing development, and small-town economies continue to struggle, many are rethinking what it means to live in the nation's rural areas. Among them is M12 Studio, a collaborative of artists firmly rooted in the heartland with the goal of using art as a way to help rural communities take a look at who they are and who they want to be. While the results of each residency with national and international artists may range from temporary sculptures to wheat-paste paintings to experiential art works, at the heart of each project is good, old-fashioned conversation. According to M12's Programming Director Kirsten Stoltz and Creative Director Richard Saxton the Acton on the Plains residency—for which M12 received an NEA Arts Works grant—is not about intervention but about interaction. As Saxton explained when we spoke with the duo by phone, "...a lot of times the first sort of entry point for us is food, and sitting around a table, and discussing, and sharing, sort of a generous act." Read on to learn more about how art works in the nation's wide-open spaces.
NEA: What’s the mission of M12?

SAXTON: M12 is a constantly evolving group of practitioners and curators and designers, and we all have a focused interest on rural sites and rural communities. That being said, it’s a quickly changing landscape. The communities and landscapes are very quickly changing, and has been for a while... We’re living in a time of extreme transition in rural America and our job as practitioners is to explore it and present it.

NEA: Can you please talk about some of the programs and work that you do?

STOLTZ: The artist-in-residence [project] in particular, the Action On the Plains program, enables us to support co-produced projects in rural eastern Colorado specifically, where we work directly with the Washington County commissioners. It’s a tiny county in Colorado.


STOLTZ: So the population is about two people per mile in Washington County. We’re interested in projects we can do with other artists that speak to the landscape. Also, community interactions are very important to the program. We encourage all of the artists and ourselves to be active participants with the community that we work within. So a lot of times, it’s based off of these multiple layers of collaboration.

SAXTON: And I think that’s what makes our artist-in-residence program different than some other sort of other approaches—the multiple layers of collaboration that are involved with the program. We don’t approach things where it’s like, “Oh, here’s an artist, come in and do this.” Action on the Plains is a research engine behind the larger work of M12 as well. Often times, these are artists or professionals that we have either come across through writing or sort of cross-pollination opportunities at speaking engagements. There’s a larger movement afoot, globally really, to understand what’s happening at the cross-section of both urban environments and rural realities. So the way that we approach this project is very collaborative, both with us as running the organization, as practitioners, and then the people that are coming, and the community members and commissioners, and landscape, and sort of everything in between.

NEA: You talked about the multiple layers of collaboration: could you be more specific about what activities some of those collaborations entail?

SAXTON: I was just reading a quote this morning that was pretty interesting. It was a quote from Joseph Beuys that said something like peeling a potato can be a work of art if it’s done with the right mode of reflection. And I think the way that we approach working with artists and those layers of collaboration sort of take that in mind, and a lot of times the first entry point for us is food: sitting around a table and discussing, sharing in a kind of generous act. And that’s really where we start a lot of our process, both with us working with other people and how we engage with the community. There’s nothing overly academic about it, I think a lot of what we do is to bring things back to places that are comfortable on an everyday level in rural communities. And from there it evolves to all the other things that one would think about in terms of art-making, whether it has to do with the conceptualizing ideas, which is done collaboratively, to actually installing the work, if there is a physical work to install.

STOLTZ: What I really love about the community interactions is that the people that we partner with aren’t afraid of doing projects that are deemed art projects. It’s a lot more freeing for artists to produce work in rural areas, if we need to bring in certain equipment, there’s a neighbor that has that piece of equipment, and they’ll come in and loan it to us. One thing that I love about working in rural places is that the interaction is real immediate: you call somebody on the telephone and you explain what you’re doing, and you work on getting the work done. There’s a real can-do attitude that I really appreciate and the artists that we’ve cultivated and worked with on projects in the past have always really appreciated that as well.

NEA: You’ve talked about the very informal collaborations between the artists and the community; are there in addition any structured collaborations that you try to have happen no matter the project or the artist?

SAXTON: There’s always structure, things that come through with these projects. But one thing that I think it’s important to identify is these projects are rooted in place first. We’re very adamant about that: we don’t really like to work with artists who have this sort of preconceived idea of what they’re going to do by landing in eastern Colorado. And so a lot of the structured components end up being implemented once the artist is here, and we do that all together based on the comfort level of what the artist is interested in, maybe what the county commissioners are interested in, what our community neighbors are interested in.

But aside from that, we do do formal presentations of the artists’ work. Again, there’s always an informal component where we’re going to have a potluck, or we might have a musician playing that night, and then the artist has the opportunity to speak with the community about the project, and the community members that are involved have the opportunity to also talk about it. Sometimes we have artists who identify specific neighbors that they want to learn from, and so we open up our space as a place for sharing local knowledge, which is a big part of our program as well. A lot of people have this attitude about rural spaces that culture doesn’t exist there, that for some reason these artists are the people who are bringing the culture to the region. Of course, it couldn’t be further from the truth. What our work is about and what these artists are doing is really enriching the culture that is already in place there. So through the programs that we do in our space, where our community members are allowed to come in and express the things that are interesting and important to them in terms of culture, that’s really the sort of spirit that drives the wheels for these types of projects.

NEA: You said that some of the collaborative activities arise organically. Can you give me some specific examples from residences past of the kinds of things that have happened?

SAXTON: Well, I was just going to mention [the visual artist] Jetsorama. ... who is a doctor and also an artist who works with large wheat pastings on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. We worked together with him, and also a community member named Joe Turecek. [Jetsorama’s] whole idea is about expressing identity through these wheat pastings that go up on architectural structures. So we were able to facilitate a dialogue-based beginning to this project: it consisted of us, Joe, and people from his family on the farm getting together, going through family archives of photographs, sharing stories, talking about what’s important to them, what resonates with the artist, what resonates with the family, what the artist has done with the past work, and then landing upon two particular images that were really powerful both for the family and the artist. Those were then taken and made into sort of large wheat pastings that were [pasted] on these grain storage bins on the farm. So that’s a tangible example of how the dialogue-based practice that we approach can manifest into these physical art objects.
That being said, I think that it's not even the focus at M12 that we bring in an artist and the intention is to "recheck up" the landscape with a bunch of visual art images out in the countryside. It's much more focused on the reality of a shifting rural environment and how we can as artists and practitioners engage in a larger dialogue about what that means for the culture of these spaces.

NEA: How do you identify the community members who will work with the artist?

STOLTZ: It's a phone call. It's talking about the artists and the projects that really get their attention... Again, we go to dinners or go and meet somebody out in the field and talk about how they're struggling or what their hopes are. I believe that Richard and I, being from small, rural towns, we sympathize with that, we understand it, and we know how to be able to honor these places and these people and the communities. I'm fifth-generation from a small town in eastern Colorado, and I appreciate that, I understand it.

NEA: Can you talk more specifically about the challenges that you're seeing communities facing because of the shifting rural landscape, and also talk about how this project helps work on those challenges?

SAXTON: I think that when you say the word "rural" to most people, the image that comes to their mind is of agriculture. Something that we're quite interested in and have been exploring for a few years now is the concept of a sort of post-agricultural, rural landscape. That doesn't mean that farming doesn't happen in rural space—of course it does—but what it means, at least in our particular case on the High Plains, is that enough time has gone by now where the great American experiment of trying to farm up the entire center of the country has proven to be unsustainable. We're seeing all kinds of things, from the over-usage of land to things like the aquifer slowly being depleted, which is the primary water source. People [from] urban environments that fly over where we live often ask, "What are all those crop circles that I see from the plane?" And that's basically all the water that's being drained from the aquifer trying to farm land that never should've been farmed in the first place.... But I think that enough time has gone by now that we realize that perhaps that great experiment of the late 1800s and early 1900s wasn't such a great idea.

You look back to these areas on the Great Plains prior to European settlement, and you see incredibly rich cultural history there. We just had a sit-down a couple of weeks ago with Frank Popper, who is the author of an influential [concept], with his wife Deborah Popper: something called the Buffalo Commons, which is essentially a proposal to turn the Great Plains back into what once was a great sort of American Serengeti landscape, where buffalo can roam freely. And I think that we're getting far enough away now that there's time where we can reflect on the cultural value on the Great Plains, what were big mistakes, and where is this going in the future. Of course that's just talking specifically about the Plains, but this is not something that's just thrown in place here on a regional level; we're seeing globally that shift from urban to rural in terms of population. I think it's [predicted] by 2050, 75 percent of people on the planet will be living in cities. Of course, there's still 25 percent living in rural areas, but that's quite a shift from years ago, when the numbers were completely flipped around. I'll paraphrase this quote from the book The Country and the City, which is talking about the common image of the city is one of the future, and the common image that comes to mind of rural is one of the past. If you sort of put those two things together, what you've left with is an undefined present, and I think that sort of resonates with where we are globally in terms of rural space.

NEA: So how are you using the arts to have that discussion about the ways ideas around that rural space are changing?

STOLTZ: The NEA support of this work being done in rural places is really important. It shows the communities that we work with that there is national support for ideas that are culminating in these small towns, and it gives them a sense of pride as well... We get asked over and over again to give talks in various kinds of urban-centric programs and really explore the ideas of the spaces that we live in and the projects that we're interested in supporting and co-producing and moving forward. I think that there's an economic driver that is certainly important: it's not our focus, but I do think that it's bringing a lot of interest in these smaller places. Hopefully, as these programs progress, there will be even more funding that comes into smaller towns through cultural projects.

SAXTON: It's also a question of if you go back to that sort of idea of a post-agricultural rural landscape, you have to ask yourself, "If the uses for these communities are no longer agricultural, well what are they? What are they going to be in the 21st century?" Do you just take an urban model and say, "Okay, we're going to reconstruct and gentrify these communities and they'll become sort of bedroom communities for our larger cities?" Or do you say, "What is the value of rural space and a growing urban reality?" And I don't think that we have the answers for that. I don't think that anybody does right now. One of the projects being [supported] by the NEA grant, with our collaborators in Holland—Onix Architects—is to think about how this 40-acre piece of land where we collaborate with the Washington Country commissioners can be turned into a site of reflection on these questions. What comes next? Does anything come next? And in some ways we're perfectly fine with the idea that perhaps nothing should be done, that this is just the way it is. But obviously, we'll sort of design and build something with Onix Architects that hopefully reflects a strong collaboration with some folks in our area and will be really visually exciting as well, and hopefully will serve the purposes of a site to reflect on what's taking place in rural space.

NEA: How do you select the artists you work with? What's the application process like?

STOLTZ: There's not an application process. Because our organization is built on people who are really interested in contemporary art and exploring curatorial ideas, we have really great resources already built into the organization.

SAXTON: All of our residents come by invitation. The way that it works is that our board of directors also serve as advisers, and so throughout time we put people forward to participate and have discussions and decide on a few people a year that we're going to invite.

STOLTZ: It's international, and national, and regional, and [we invite] people like Matt Slaby, who is from Colorado, and his work is very interesting in the idea of rural contexts... He's really familiar with working in rural communities in Colorado, and really already had a real drive to do a project in Colorado... It's great to support an artist who is making artwork in the region... We're not adverse to any creative practitioner, but we are really interested in engaging artists that are already invested in ideas of how to build work with and in rural communities.

SAXTON: There's a certain sensibility that I think we look for when one is working with other artists in this program. Anybody can go to any museum in any city and walk around and ask yourself the question—"What am I looking at that sort of represents rural space?" Once you get beyond sort of romantic ideas, there's not much there. We want to be working with people who are not only just interested in rural space or might be artists that live in rural areas or that live in cities and that have a deep interest in working with rural space, but that are also very dedicated to the sort of discourse in pushing this dialogue about rural and urban realities.
NEA: One final question—what does “Art works” mean to you?

STOLTZ: I think in terms of how the NEA is supporting us, and what that means to M12 is that there’s a real rigor to the practice of art and existing in society and moving discourse about contemporary art.... It’s not necessarily just a flat object or sculptural object that lives in a museum. It can exist in really interesting places and be a form of community support, financially and psychically. That art is important to all communities.

SAXTON: What strikes me about the terminology is that it’s recognizing that art does have a powerful role to play in how we approach things that we may not know how to define right now. And I think what resonates for me is that... all these different practices that encompass how we understand contemporary art-making today, that those are viable working elements to the larger world of constructing a culture for the 21st century, which is what our job is.

Category:
Creative Placemaking, Grants

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creative placemaking, Jetsonorama, M12 Studio, rural arts