

W(here) Festival, Pictou County, Nova Scotia:  
curating within rural communities

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis consists of a curatorial essay and project entitled the W(here) Festival, a five day contemporary art festival in Pictou County, Nova Scotia with works by Marlene Creates, Sheilah Wilson, Site Media Inc. (Katherine Knight and David Craig), Susan Sellers, Raina McDonald, Sharon Nowlan, Linda Little and Sheree Fitch. Exploring ideas of place, art and community, makers from a variety of disciplines and experiences led residents in specially designed field trips, projects, presentations as well as discussion, story and song. This festival was a hands-on experience that moved beyond gallery walls exploring new ideas of rural contemporary curatorial and artistic practices through collaboration, place and place-based artwork, as well as definitions of rural identity and community. This essay considers the project's development, the challenges and opportunities of curating "here", and the lasting impact of this project within curatorial practices and the local communities of Pictou County.

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Finally I thank my family who has supported me in so many ways I can't even begin to describe here. Thank you for every day.

## **Dedication**

To the communities of Pictou County this project is for you. May it encourage other artists and cultural organizers to be brave in places like yours and for others to listen.

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All photographs courtesy of Mary MacDonald

## **PART I: Introduction to W(here) Festival**

### **Project Brief**

To me, contemporary art is not just the cultural product of today, but the relationships we build, the conversations we have and the experiences we choose to create that reflect the place we live and who we are. And so, in all of the places that contemporary art may exist, so too may the active practice of curating working in the space between artists and audiences. An opportunity to facilitate shared aesthetic experiences and exchange knowledge was at the heart of the W(here) Festival. My goal was to define a critical curatorial approach that actively engaged local art practices through research, community engagement and the realization of a public project.

On the northern shore of Nova Scotia before one reaches Cape Breton, Pictou County sits along the Northumberland Strait its coves and beaches opening towards Prince Edward Island. Within these geographic boundaries, five small towns collect around a large harbour while an assortment of even smaller villages dot the landscape. It is here and all the places in-between that the W(here) Festival took place June 26-30 2012.

A five day contemporary art festival, W(here) sought to bring together local and visiting artists as well as residents in a rich program for all ages. Throughout the

research and implementation of this project, it was affirmed that while local rural audiences are far from major cities and therefore access to museums, galleries and artist run centres is limited, there remains a deep need and desire for aesthetic and personal engagement with artistic practices.

This report begins with the curatorial essay published prior to the festival as a public document with a schedule of events. The essay, *W(here) we are*, was written primarily with the local communities in mind. It introduces myself, the project, the artists and ideas of place, art and community to Pictou County. The essay's structure diverges from the traditional academic paper incorporating multiple voices and timelines. This narrative approach is in part, informed by the rich history of storytelling in Atlantic Canada, authors such as Alistar MacLeod, Linda Little, Johanna Skibsrud, who all write from a position of place that is diverse, complex yet very accessible.

In part two, I tease out some of the challenges encountered and methods employed in designing the *W(here)* Festival's programme of events. Incorporating a wide range of presentation modes from artist talks and social events to community discussion, workshops, participatory artworks and field-trips this project involved many decisions that are useful in thinking about the presentation of art and artistic practices in rural places. Furthermore, as *W(here)* was heavily discursive and collaborative, I give a descriptive account of each event introduced

in the curatorial essay. In reality, this report can only give the reader a glimpse of what was actually experienced by a wide range of participants, artists and residents simultaneously. It is my hope that this document is seen as one of many possible interpretations of the story.

Moreover, the artists selected for the W(here) Festival represented a wide range of education and experience. While some were self-taught, others were trained academically. Through research and discussion with the community's artists I discovered that what constitutes "contemporary" artistic practice(s) in Pictou County mapped a particular social geography that is permeable and subject to change. In other words, there was not one type of artistic practice that the community aspired to. All practices shared a discursive space together. Reflecting this, the W(here) Festival included three visiting artist projects by Marlene Creates, Sheilah Wilson and Site Media Inc, four works by local artists drawn from a call for submissions by Susan Sellers, Raina McDonald, Sharon Nowlan, Linda Little and Sheree Fitch, seven presentations by additional local artists and one musical performance by Al Tuck.

As a curatorial project, the challenge was to bring a critical approach to this work while remaining open and accessible to the local community. This was the first time that a project of this nature had occurred in Pictou County therefore building audience was therefore a key component of this process. In part three, I discuss

some of the various methods I employed to develop local support and artist involvement for this project.

Finally in part four, I turn to analysis. Overall successes and failures of the W(here) Festival are examined from two perspectives: as community member and curator. This project has had a very real impact on the local artistic communities. At the same time, the project is also located in a larger discourse of curatorial practices. While these narratives overlap, they are distinct and should be considered each in their own way. Ultimately curating in the field brings with it some obvious and not so obvious challenges. However, surprising opportunities arose as well. It is with this potential to define a more embedded practice within rural communities (combining both a theoretical and personal approach) that the W(here) Festival sought to operate. By facilitating connections between artists and communities, the local and the global, this project suggests further consideration of curating in rural places.

Here I include as appendices to this project report a number of additional documents for the reader's interest: the original published essay, festival schedule and poster (Appendix A), visiting artist Sheilah Wilson's newspaper for her project *The Invisible Inside the Visible* (Appendix B), a series of screenshots of the festival website (Appendix C) and two of seven Field Reports written by local residents (Appendix D).

## Essay Preamble

Throughout the development of this project I recognized that the languages of contemporary art, academic research and indeed my own expertise had to be seen through a local lens. I do not consider this a reduction of content. Rather, I see it as an acknowledgment that to speak about the local perspective, in this case how place is perceived, defined and imagined through artistic projects, one must operate in tandem with local knowledges and vernaculars. For example, we chose the idea of a kitchen party rather than an evening of artist talks or a series of field trips rather performance art works. This was a choice of respecting local knowledges rather than co-opting them, defining a vocabulary that the project could work within.

Activating this line of thinking, the curatorial essay *W(here) we are* was published for the communities of Pictou County in advance of the festival. The text is intentionally written from various authorial points of view, voices and timelines. In the main column, it tells a story of process, of making this project happen in the here and now. I use “I” on purpose to situate myself as a member of the local community and as curator. While I am from Pictou County, I do not think one has to be from any particular place in order to investigate it. On the other hand, I do not deny that this fact sped the building of relationships and trust. Interrupting the main narrative of the essay are additional local voices past and present including historians, authors of fiction and musicians.

Ultimately, this essay is a treatise on how place can be defined through the creative imagination as much as it is through geography, industry and history. Evidence of this process of place making is found in the rich tradition of storytelling in the area (which this essay derives its tone) and the W(here) Festival's projects. Finally, for those who desire a deeper interrogation of this subject, marginalia along the side of the main narrative delves into theories of place, art-in-community and the rural expanding the local perspective and connecting to broader intellectual debates.

## PART II: Curatorial Essay

W(here) we are.

*All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.*  
- Benedict Anderson<sup>1</sup>

Through collaboration, performance and storytelling, the

**W(here) Festival** asks a pretty ambiguous question,

“Where is here exactly?”<sup>2</sup> Some say Pictou County, Nova Scotia is a rural place, the home of the best pizza in Canada or perhaps evidence of a living Scottish legacy. However as borders shift, people migrate and technologies spread, this question of place is ever more at the forefront of local residents, agencies and artists’ minds. Like urban places, rural ones also struggle to re-define themselves in a new global context, combining established narratives and new ideas.

One day after a snowstorm in February, I drive along the Sunrise Trail, sun gleaming through the trees casting a web of shadows on the highway. When I was young, my family used to travel this way every summer passing little houses

<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson explores the idea of nation as an imaginary political community through the modern era. Mutable, the nation is found to be a cultural artifact in its own right (6) and influenced by the interplay between fatality, technology and capitalism (43). (*Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1991.)

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye believed that this question of “Where is here?” was even more important than “Who am I” for the Canadian imagination. The ever-present sense of wilderness haunted authors, as did our compromising position between British offspring and American neighbour (220). (*The Bush Garden*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971)



along the way to our cottage in Toney River. Although the drive was only 15 minutes or so from the town of Pictou, it always felt as if we were being transported into some other dimension where the rules of space and time were well, just different. With salt on our skin and the smell of clay in our noses we would walk barefoot through sand, hay and grass inventing new histories and games from the places we roamed.

In one such place, two points<sup>3</sup> away there stood a great mystery on the beach. My siblings and I would set off in the morning, backpacks filled with peanut butter sandwiches and Smarties<sup>TM</sup>, tracing the shifting boundary between ocean and sand. After an hour of walking that seemed more like a week, we would round that final edge.

*There it was!* A smooth beach with one gigantic rock smack dab in the middle of it. *A meteorite!* Rushing towards it, we ran our hands over its surface inspecting each dip, bump and crevice like true scientists would<sup>4</sup>.

Back on the highway, each house I pass reminds me that they too contain their own story-makers and storytellers<sup>5</sup>.

3 Points, what we would call the spits of land separating beach from beach.

4 We all imagine place through our experiences. Mike Pearson states that "just as landscapes are constructed out of the imbricated actions and experiences of people, so people are constructed in and dispersed through their habituated landscape: each individual, significantly has a particular set of possibilities in presenting an account of their own landscape: stories" (12). (*In Comes I: Performance, Memory and Landscape*. Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006)

But how might we as individuals engage these perspectives, to encourage new ways of critical thinking about this place called Pictou County? With this question in mind, the **W(here) Festival** was created. During the festival, local and visiting artists will lead audiences in a series of “field trips”, community-based art projects and nightly discussion events exploring the connections, layers and gaps between place, art and communities<sup>6</sup> found “here”.

Much of the **W(here) Festival**’s development stems from ideas of community-based ways of working. Consulting with residents and local artists, it was clear that their stories needed to be told. In a place where there are few galleries and large cultural institutions, projects must happen through collaboration and partnership with the local community<sup>7</sup>. This active networking is both a need and a goal. Events such as the festival launch and the community town-hall discussion foreground this social aspect. During the launch event, *kitchen pARTy*, local artists share a platform introducing their artwork to each other and the public. Like many other community projects, it is important

5 Sociologists Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney write that “In the telling, we remember, we rework and reimagine the past, reflect back upon ourselves, and entertain what we have and could become. What is included or omitted from our stories makes plausible our anticipated futures” (5). (*Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2005)

6 Scott Lash describes the shift of focus from art object to art objective (89-90). This is a powerful way to describe the call for sociality in much of contemporary art practices and exhibitions today. (“Difference or Sociality”. In *Towards a Theory of Image*. Ed. Jon Thompson, Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Akademie, 1996)

7 Suzanne Lacy forefronts the importance of communication in building successful projects with community members. This kind of work “cannot be fully realized through monologue” but through “dialogue, in open conversation in which one is obliged to listen and include other voices” (36, 83). (*Mapping the Terrain*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995)

that all share authorship for ultimately **W(here)** is a festival about and for the communities “here”.

I am on my way to visit Meh Yap<sup>8</sup> at her gas station in River John to discuss installing an art project by Sheilah Wilson. As curator of **W(here)**, it is my hope to animate possibilities for connections such as this one, however I am also a traveler, a listener, a partner and a moderator amongst many individuals whose perspectives about this place overlap and undertow. Like incoming waves upon a beach each narrative builds upon the last. But is it possible or even necessary to know all of the waves that have come before and will come in the future? No. For when we watch the waves come in, it is the movement, the making, the telling of the beach’s story right before our eyes that we are drawn to. The beach is constantly evolving just like “here”.

And so, the **W(here) Festival** embodies this kind of movement. The festival is a 5-day active look at place-based practices in Pictou County, a series of wave-like events, chapters rather than objects. Through walking and talking, we learn through storytelling<sup>9</sup>. The festival is an

8 Meh Yap is a resident of River John and owner of the Lee Tik Service Centre. This gas station has a special role in the community as a gathering place where residents share local gossip, history and information and as such is an important local institution.

9 Storytelling is often said to be quite natural to Maritimers. But whose stories are implied here? Ian MacKay challenges this idea of an “essential and unchanging solidarity of traditional society” (12) opening up the possibility for multiple and simultaneous perspectives. (*Quest of the Folk: Anti-modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University

opportunity for creative exploration, bringing together visiting artists, a dispersed local art community and residents to learn from and add to ideas of “here” or where it might be.

*That day they landed at the point just above the Town Gut, which had been selected as the site of a town, as a part of the Company’s grant nearest to the entrance of the harbour. The prospect was indeed dreary enough. One unbroken forest covered the whole surface of the country to the water’s edge. All around stood the mighty monarchs of the wood in all their primeval grandeur, the evergreens spreading a sombre covering over the plains and up the hills relieved by the lighter shade of the deciduous trees, with here and there some tall spruce rising like a black minaret or spire above its fellows (57-8).*<sup>10</sup>

10 Rev. George Patterson’s text includes many early oral histories of the region. These indented paragraphs draw from local fiction, music and history of the region. (*A history of the County of Pictou, Nova Scotia*. Montreal: Dawson, 1877)

Traditionally artworks are selected and arranged before the public walks through the gallery doors. But here, the festival is an exhibition in-motion and viewers are participants. What will be said? Who will hear it? How will it be received? Participants are given the opportunity to interact and engage on various levels with artists who may surprisingly reflect or even challenge viewers experiences, landscapes and histories. In this way, viewers are an active<sup>11</sup> and important part of the festival ultimately choosing what will be remembered both collectively and individually.

11 Grant Kester sees conversation as an “active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities” (8). (*Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. London: University of California Press, 2004)

For example, during *Walking in Place: Field Trips*, local artists and community members Susan Sellers, Raina McDonald, Sharon Nowlan, Linda Little and Sheree Fitch offer new ways of experiencing home territories through their own creative practices. Taking residents on four distinct journeys, each location is transformed through a process of exchange: storytelling, on-location performance and art-making. Following each other's footsteps, asking questions, telling jokes; these are all a part of our experience of place and the art that is created around it.

*The mouth of the Scotch River estuary sparkled wide and blue to his left, the houses came closer and closer together on his right. He passed the first of the village churches and the liquor store. An ancient man hobbled from an old Dodge pickup towards the liquor store punching his cane into the air. When he reached the door he called out like a crow – whether in greeting or curse was not clear. The building swallowed his words and then the man himself. Cass passed the post office, the bank. Before the bridge, at the junction of the highway and the Station Road that marked the heart of the village, stood the Co-op, the hardware store, the drugstore. Still. Everything looked older, smaller, grayer, emptier than he remembered (22-23).<sup>12</sup>*

12 In Linda Little's novel, *Scotch River* the main character Cass returns home with a mysterious land claim after years living out west. Scotch River is a fictional rendering of the very real River John in Pictou County. (*Scotch River*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007)

As I drive between Pictou and River John, I realize that this county is such a nebulous place. Made up of five small towns, numerous villages and winding roads, forests, and

shorelines in-between I notice how the direct and physical experience of this geography defines how I move through this place. Like the first European settlers who came to these shores, my experience and how I remember “here”<sup>13</sup> is also impacted by the physical. And while there are unique land formations simultaneously there are the same Tim Hortons<sup>14</sup> here and across the country.

I pull into the Lee Tik Service Centre in River John. Inside, two older ladies in sun-bleached sky-blue uniforms greet me with generous smiles and a questioning look. I ask for Meh and one clerk shuffles off to the back room, past the rubber boots and the racks of VHS tapes and DVDs. Meh emerges smiling ear to ear and immediately exclaims that I look like my brother. Although she hasn’t seen me for years she recognizes me. I realize at this moment, that I am not a free-floating entity here - an objective academic - but an imbedded member of this community (mind you, one that is from both here and away).

We all have many identities. Pictou County’s 250 years of written plus more of oral history tells an ongoing narrative

13 There is also a political dimension to this geography. For example, the British Crown who desired new economies in Nova Scotia promised many poor farmers free farmland to settle there. However when they arrived they found an immense forest instead. Today residents are threatened by encroaching wind turbines that also promise new economies yet impact property value.

14 Social geographer Michael Woods describes the global countryside as a place where the local and the global are networked together in “millions of dynamic meeting-points, where different networks, flows and processes are knotted together in unique ways” (291). This is evident not by the Tim Hortons franchises themselves but in how we interact with them. Many Tims are genuine community points of exchange, meeting places, and sponsors of local sports. (*Rural*. New York: Routledge, 2011)

of constantly shifting communities. Those who visit, live or have lived here (Canadian<sup>15</sup>, Mi'kmaq, Scottish, Black, French, Gay etc.) all produce histories, songs, stories and artworks. Culture then is continually made and unmade, told and forgotten by its artists, writers and historians.

Exploring ideas of communal memory through social<sup>16</sup> interaction, visiting artist Sheilah Wilson has been interviewing residents, searching for River John's legendary turn-of-the century racetrack. This project, *The Invisible Inside the Visible*, will be installed at Meh's gas station during the **W(here) Festival**. Wilson has asked residents to draw where they think the racetrack might be. There is something decidedly magical about Wilson's revival of a physical site from oral accounts alone. In this way, Wilson's project is both an spoken archive and a visual treasure map to the past.

Wilson's project is also a good example of how the community's past and present industries impact "here" as well. Mining, fishing, forestry, tourism and at one time, racing, were all a part of larger economic histories of

15 What is Canadian? Himani Bannerji investigates how Canada "as a nationalist project is perceived to be homogenous, solid, and settled entity"(73). In reality, Canadian-ness simultaneously creates "feelings of belonging and alienation" (66) for many not of Anglo-European descent. (*Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2000)

16 Miwon Kwon explores notions of site-specific art as it relates to the social world around it. Often this work is informed by a broad range of disciplines creating a more discursive space, "an extension of the community rather than an intrusive contribution from elsewhere" (6) (*One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, 2004)

Pictou County. Like the various terrains and multiple identities found here, economic narratives also overlap and blend into one another. These stories strongly affect family histories<sup>17</sup>, individual perspectives, lifestyles and future goals. Traditionally much of the work in Pictou County had its own sense of identity as well. One was a fisherman, a miner, a liberal, a conservative, etc. While this brought a sense of comradeship (great physical work adding to a certain heartiness of character) today many people feel they must move away to find work<sup>18</sup>. Some return home<sup>19</sup> periodically while others are beginning to consolidate<sup>20</sup> in the larger New Glasgow area (moving away from maintaining distinct town-mentalities). Thus, work continues to shape how residents see this place.

*Now the mainstreet's dark and silent  
 Not a shadow or a sound  
 But midnight brings the spirits out  
 From the coal mines in the ground  
 In my dreams they all come back again  
 The good folks of the day  
 They're all trying to save the life they knew from  
 going  
 Down the new highway<sup>21</sup>*

This is all to suggest that perhaps 'place' is not just one thing, but a combination of partial knowledges passed on, community interaction and direct experience. And while

17 One of the most profound narratives that has overshadowed many who live in Pictou County is that of the Westray mining disaster in 1992 where 26 men were killed.

18 In the past, residents migrated to Pictou County to find work close to home. Today many move between home and away, taking seasonal or contractual work in places such as Halifax, Toronto or Fort McMurray.

19 Yi-Fu Tuan argues that our sense of home or "centre" is not a geographical location but a concept in mythic thought (150). In this way then, home is a personal experience derived from many senses and not simply a fixed physical location. (*Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977)

20 Most county health services, high schools, shopping and recreation have merged, most recently exemplified by the Pictou County Wellness Centre currently under construction.

21 These lyrics are from *The New Highway*, a song by Pictou musician and songwriter Dave Gunning. (*Two-bit World*. Pictou: Wee House of Music, 2004)



memory is important, so too is the importance of observation, acuity and the present moment. It is here<sup>22</sup> that the **W(here) Festival** seeks to bring new energy and new criticality to the story of Pictou County.

Visiting artist Marlene Creates' artistic career brings human experience, memory and the land together. Her project for the **W(here) Festival**, *Award Ribbons for Pictou County*, speaks to multiple senses<sup>23</sup> of place by asking residents to share their most meaningful locations.

Travelling from site to site, numerous award ceremonies will be performed with residents marking locations with a ribbon. By awarding unlikely places of celebration, Creates' gesture reminds us that when we tell a story, we also affirm its subject, giving it official significance. It is possible that new sites will be discovered, old ones re-discovered and others re-imagined. Again, this project gives individuals a chance to participate in the making of the work itself, adding layers to the imagined community. In addition, the award-winning sites will be translated to an online map, a virtual<sup>24</sup> layer, with the potential for global audiences to access "here".

22 Lucy Lippard notes how experiential watchfulness helps focus community endeavors, art or otherwise, in becoming 'social catalysts' as opposed to 'shrines' (37). The former being much more encouraging of growth. (*Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1997)

23 Lippard also notes the idea that place is defined by lived experience which incorporates ideas of land, history and culture (5). (*Lure of the Local*)

24 While physically visiting awarded sites provides an embodied experience, interacting online can only be done so through representation. Reesa Greenberg adds that virtual spaces offer "opportunities to record aspects of exhibitions that, until now, have remained invisible or under visualized" (9). The virtual map features at-a-glance cohesiveness, global access and an archive of video interviews with residents about each location. ("Remembering Exhibitions": From Point to Line to Web." *Tate Papers* 12. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/issue-12>. 2009)

After our chat and taking some photos outside, Meh emerged again, this time from the kitchen. Waving her arms she rushed me through, past my 4 egg rolls I had just ordered simmering in hot oil. “Come here. You must meet Raymond!” she exclaimed. Raymond was sitting with a package of coconut cookies and *The Chronicle Herald* at the high table in the middle of the convenience store. You could tell this was a meeting place for the latest village news and Raymond was the kind of guy who knew it all. He and I spoke of local history, national politics and even the best driving routes to Whitehorse.

Historically, rural Nova Scotians have been presented with a sort of rugged romanticism. Folklorists like Helen Creighton travelled from city to country, recording songs and stories of local people, creating a singular mythology of the Nova Scotian, an idealized “fisherfolk”, that was upheld for many years. These notions gave rural places a Scottish authenticity<sup>25</sup> to bank on and cultural products to market. Today however, rural residents and artists are active story-tellers themselves. They too are migratory, moving between urban and rural geographies and social

25 Ian MacKay challenges Creighton and other homogenous views of Nova Scotia identity by applying a postmodern critique of structures of power. More often than not, this authentic Nova Scotian identity is used more by the Department of Fisheries (294) and other provincial authorities for tourism ends than by actual residents. (*Quest of the Folk*)

structures. In many ways we are of multiple places and are constantly moving between them.

*“Where are you from?” he asks as the car moves forward, “from Cape Breton,” I say and tell him the name of my home town.  
“We are too,” he says, “but we’re from the Island’s other side. I guess the mines are pretty well finished where you’re from. They’re the old ones. They’re playing out where we’re from too. Where are you going now?  
“I don’t know.” I say. “I don’t know.” (50-51)<sup>26</sup>*

26 Alistar Macleod is a renowned Atlantic author whose stories lament the loss of family, identity and a Scottish heritage. Mixing oral and contemporary literary forms this excerpt is from the short story *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976)

One way to create a more complex approach to storytelling is to highlight multiple voices and invite them to speak for themselves. Seasonal residents and film-makers Katherine

Knight and David Craig of Site Media Inc. engage this process in their project, *Memory Factory*, that highlights the Maritime Packers lobster cannery in Caribou, NS.

Craig and Knight bring local stories to life through online documentary film vignettes, historical research and still image. Ultimately, *Memory Factory* is an interactive online repository<sup>27</sup> of local stories that captures what life was like for the employees and residents at the factory. An

27 Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook assert that in new media art works, even though the site is “immaterial, it can also be ‘located’” (120). This hybridity between the site specific and the online is an interesting link to think about ways global technologies can be incorporated into artworks about place. (“Introduction to Rethinking Curating.” *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010)

important part of Pictou County’s economic history, many of the workers were brought here each spring, creating temporary communities<sup>28</sup>. Living on-site they created an dynamic culture, making music, telling stories and working

28 Many of these workers were from away, Acadian women for example.

long hours together. Today, the factory no longer exists, new condominiums stretch out over the grassy beach where once boats would haul in their catches. This project will be launched during the festival's closing event.

But what does making and experiencing art through communities in rural places such as Pictou County offer? Much has been discussed above about the importance of sharing residents' multiple perspectives. Collaboratively broadening world-views we begin to look for new ways to connect, to imagine community, to critique the status quo and to visualize new futures! The **W(here) Festival** is but one way to engage. In a way, the festival is an opportunity, an exciting think-tank event to consider where we are and where we are going through creative practices: discussion events, field-trips, artist projects and new technologies.

On a curatorial level, I argue that art practices and engagements in rural places teach us how to re-examine the familiar, re-imagine place and make change on a more human-scale. Projects tend to take a long time to develop here and their legacy felt long after. Unlike cities where

cultural products come and go almost on a daily basis, here change can be profound, slow and incredibly meaningful.

In addition, projects out “here” can often be over looked, ephemeral.<sup>29</sup> But indeed, the old divide between city and country is a tired one<sup>30</sup>. Instead, the projects, stories and actions of the **W(here) Festival** suggest new simultaneous territories<sup>32</sup> and methodologies that are rich and complex.

On the way back home to Pictou, I remember the half-way house, as we used to call it. Half yellow and half white, it marked the boundary between our summer and fall. On one side imagination ran wild and on the other it was back to school, friends and the future. It is my hope that the we expand our imaginary boundaries about place, art and community during the **W(here) Festival**. I look forward to hearing your stories.

*And so, this is the end... but it's only the end of this volume of the past and present in Pictou. The Pictou Parade will go on long after you and I have fallen out of the procession (114)*<sup>32</sup>

- **Mary MacDonald** grew up in Pictou County and is the curator of the W(here) Festival.

29 The same could also be said here for the East itself at times and other more remote locations of Canada!

30 This is also reflected in the history of museums. Grant Kester suggests that “rather than posit a hierarchy between museum based art and projects developed in non-art environments, it is more appropriate to think of these as two equally productive sites, each with its own appropriate strategies and potential compromises” (189). (*Conversation Pieces*) I take issue here with the term “non-art environment” maybe unconventional-art environments is more suitable.

31 Michael Woods states that seen from a relational perspective, the rural consists of many dynamic intersections and narratives where various networks, flows and processes are knotted together in unique ways. (291). (*Rural*)

32 Roland H. Sherwood, a popular writer for the *Pictou Advocate* published an anthology of Pictou stories in 1945. (*The Pictou Parade*. Sackville: Tribune Press, 1945)

## **PART III: Project Report**

### **Festival Traditions**

In the selection of the artists and works for the W(here) Festival I was conscious of the divide between what was historically considered the margins – small town and rural Canada – and various city centres in relation to contemporary art practices. The discourse of Canadian regionalism is but one example of this narrative. However, I was interested in the conversation between contemporary artists and communities and the complexity of artistic practices and methods that engage the local. Historically, there is a wealth of knowledge that describes how artists have engaged with rural communities to varying degrees of success including community arts practices, public art and site-specific practices, dialogic, relational practices and even community engaged theatre. Instead of imposing hierarchies amongst community-engaged practices, the W(here) Festival sought to give each artist the opportunity to speak from their perspective and experience. In addition, not only did the project wish to include opportunities for material and social engagement, but digitally as well through the festival website.

I was also intrigued by the festival as a model of presentation for art in Pictou County. Not only is the idea of a festival much more familiar than an art exhibition generally, there is a rich tradition of festivals in rural places. Close-to-home examples include the New Glasgow Riverfront Jubilee and the Pictou Lobster Carnival. Festivals are inherently seasonal, like many of the other

industries in this rural place, fishing, farming, tourism etc. Festivals are also celebratory and inclusive which is something that I believe can only increase the accessibility of contemporary art for new audiences. Lastly on a logistical level, festivals provide possibilities for intimate and high-energy connection for small populations without the need for a year-long lease and a large staff that accompanies permanent institutions.

Moving through the W(here) Festival's schedule, it became clear that each event added a new layer, a new sense of place, rather than a consecutive chapter of a pre-determined narrative. Each event had a distinct energy, at times funny, emotional, nostalgic, hopeful, but always honest. The participants of the W(here) Festival also brought a level of passionate and personal engagement for which even I was unprepared. I believe strongly this is due in part to the festival thematic itself (this was about *their* place after all) but also to the development of personal relationships within the community during the research phase and the lack of preconceptions of presenting art in *this* place.

### **W(here) Program and Discussion**

The festival began with a launch at a local meeting-place Carvers Coffeehouse and Studio on June 26 2012 at 7pm. *kitchen pARTy*, cheekily played with the Maritime tradition inviting artists instead of musicians to give short “performances” about their work. Seven artists participated: Eliza Fernbach,

Susan Tilsley Manley, Amanda MacDonald, St. Clair Prest, Carolyn Vienneau and Fenn Martin. They are filmmakers, painters, sculptors and textile artists of all ages and experiences (Fig. 1). What was most surprising was the range and depth of the practices that were presented and the audiences' willingness to engage with the work by asking questions (Fig. 2). In a place where the definition of Art often leads to a fallback conversation about painting, *kitchen pARTy* introduced the idea of interdisciplinary practices slyly by asking artists to speak about process rather than product alone. Their passionate engagement with their work led to discussions of femininity, teaching-as-practice, life in rural places and finding one's place. From another point of view, this evening was straightforward storytelling allowing the audience to contemplate, laugh and engage with the artists and each other on a human level rather than be faced with artwork alone.

The format for the evening was chosen for a number of reasons. First, *kitchen pARTy* would immediately build audience for the following days of the W(here) Festival. From an energy standpoint, it is always good to begin with a bang, a packed house and a lot of interactive discussion. Second, it allowed the festival to incorporate a range of artists and artistic projects that it would not have been able to if each were commissioned individually. As this was the first time a project of this nature had happened in Pictou County, understandably many artists wanted to be involved. I had framed the festival as a community event and so I had to find a way to incorporate their desire to engage while also maintaining curatorial



direction. And third, *kitchen pARTy* sent the message that this festival would be an active experience. In the following days this idea of discussion, process and interdisciplinary ways of making would continue. We would not be in a gallery but “out there” meeting and working with more artists in and of this place.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, the following morning, we reconvened at the Bayview Community Hall for the first day of Marlene Creates’ project *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County*. This community hall was once one of many one-room schoolhouses found throughout the county. The building sits on a bend on the Bayview Road overlooking a dairy farm. The old green chalkboards and pictures hanging on the walls attest to its former educational role yet today it serves many functions (a small example of how rural places are constantly transforming), converting at will into a voting station, a place to play cards, and apparently a site to host art workshops.

Prior to the festival, a call for participants to partake in Marlene’s project was sent out as there would be a lot of travelling involved in her project. We had to account for the large geographical area of Pictou County. That morning I noticed that there were a mixture of ages, artists, arts-minded individuals and other residents (some seasonal, some permanent and others who grew up here and now live elsewhere). I noted too some additional participants Marlene invited from the night before at Carvers. One of the advantageous aspects of the festival model is

that it has the ability to adapt in this way, to build a temporary provisional community over a successive number of days.

Marlene began with a presentation wherein she discussed a previous version of *Award Ribbons* she had performed in Lawn, Newfoundland. It was a moving talk, where she noted some of the surprising locations that her collaborators, a group of school children, chose to give an award to – graveyards where relatives were buried, a garden, a soccer field, etc. The crowd gathered at Bayview was quiet and attentive. Marlene then asked participants to think about a site that they would like to give an award to in Pictou County, “a place that is meaningful to you” that would be incorporated in to the Pictou version of the project. Place, seen through Creates project was a personal experience and not a pre-packaged landscape, something to be shared and discussed. In this way, *Award Ribbons* was ultimately an exercise in place-making itself that featured the memorialization of personal rather than touristic narratives.

Participants gathered around wooden tables and the chatter increased (Fig. 3). Each was given a white ribbon to design their own award from scratch. Many included a simple image that related to the place they had chosen. For example, St. Clair chose a flower to represent his garden. In addition, all of the awards featured a phrase of ceremonial text that would announce the award winning

location to a passerby. *Most Resilient Island. Best Place to Grow Up. A Long Time Here!*, these were hand-made, unassuming and incredibly personal awards.

It was clear that we would be visiting a lot of natural places, trees, beaches, gardens as well as some places that were disappearing or had disappeared already. It was surprising that three of the participants wished to give an award to the same location, an island mountain at Waterside Beach Provincial Park. In the end, two decided to award this place while the third chose an alternate site. After designing and making their awards we made a plan for the following two mornings to caravan together from ceremony to ceremony (Fig.4). The first day we would travel the northern shoreline along the Sunrise Trail and on the second we would visit the southern part of the county and two towns.

Later that afternoon we met artist, writer and retired schoolteacher Susan Sellers for the first of four field-trips led by local artists. We gathered on the dock in downtown Pictou where we would soon be ferried to Pictou Island. The festival had sent out a call for submissions for this series, *Walking in Place: Field Trips in Pictou County* in early February. The goal was to bring together audiences and artists in a discursive way that would open up conversations of process and to investigate how place informs local artists' work. I was also interested in how curating in this place might incorporate various creative forms beyond visual practices and experiences. Susan, for example had been a schoolteacher for many

years and, for the final 5 years of the school program on Pictou Island, had become the enrichment teacher on the island. Her writing had been inspired by nurse Margaret MacDonald, a historically prominent woman in this island community who had for many years walked the one road, delivering health care services to residents.

Familiar with current performative practices within contemporary art, I was interested in how Sellers' proposal embraced a walking-as-art experience without really saying so (Fig. 7). In her work, *Following the Footsteps of an Unsung Heroine*, Susan led a group of participants along the Pictou Island Road, stopping at various sites that were significant to MacDonald's life and work. On one hand this experience was similar to many traditional walking tours, yet its subject, a working woman who lived a humble life on a even more humble island adrift in the Northumberland Strait strikes of historical re-contextualization. In this work, Sellers' re-configures the roster of remembered local hero(ine)s all the while asking participants to physically experience MacDonald's movement across the island.

This was an example of the convergence of experiences and intentions that was an important aspect of the W(here) Festival. For what did it mean to include a work such as *Following the Footsteps of an Unsung Heroine* if the artist herself did not see the work in the same way as the curator? A self-trained artist and retired

teacher, Sellers did not use the same language as I to discuss her work. I would suggest that as all works are experienced from various subject positions, their interpretations are as well. Furthermore, these interpretations exist simultaneously within multiple (sometimes temporary) timelines and perspectives. As the W(here) Festival included artists (and a curator) who were both traditionally trained and self-taught, these variations are strikingly evident, but extremely productive. Diverse purpose and interpretation of “the best” is much more exciting than presenting all works or interpretations of a similar tone. After all, the term “best” is relative depending on the context of experience.

We indeed followed the footsteps of MacDonald, visiting the old Pioneer Cemetery and the Church where we were passed lyrics to Margaret’s favorite hymn, *Will your anchor hold in the storms of life?*. Some of those who adventured with us to Pictou Island knew the tune well and sang along to Sellers’ tape recording. Our field-trip ended with Sellers reading from her own work derived in part, from life on Pictou Island and MacDonald’s legacy (Fig.8.).

On day three of the festival we met our group of *Award Ribbons* participants at Sheilah Wilson’s home in Cape John. Surrounded by fresh coffee, strawberries and cinnamon buns, the group chatted casually with one another before setting off down the road to the first of five award ceremonies. Sheilah had chosen a secret beach she and her daughter had discovered a few years past. After nailing her

white ribbon into a piece of driftwood Marlene asked Sheilah to speak about why she had chosen this place. Each participant's story was captured on video and made available on the festival website via Google map. We then travelled to Toney River, Waterside Beach and Little Beach. All shorelines, these were liminal territories, spaces in flux, caught between there and not there. It was incredible how passionate each resident's presentation was. Many of the sites had connections to childhood but also to a sense of disappearing places. The most literal example was the location of the island mountain at Waterside Beach (Fig. 5). Once eight to ten acres, this place has been slowly eroding over many years. That day, the island was barely big enough for our standing group of ten. Erosion is a reality and ongoing issue in Pictou County, yet on the island mountain we acknowledged how these shifting shorelines and their prominent features have multiple identities, each resident holding a varied experience and different name for the same place.

We were soon enroute to River John, a village in the western part of Pictou County. River John was once a fishing and ship-building community, today home to many farmers, writers and other creative peoples. Sheilah Wilson's project *The Invisible Inside the Visible*, was the second of three visiting artist projects selected for the W(ere) Festival. Born and raised in Caribou (also in Pictou County) Wilson had returned in recent years to investigate the Cape John racetrack. Outside of the Lee Tik Service Centre (the local gas station) interviews with

residents played on headsets (Fig. 9) at a picnic table accompanied by a newspaper made by the artist that featured excerpts of these interviews, an aerial image the artist had commissioned, and a brief description of the project (Appendix B). Inside the convenience store, the newspaper also found a home next to local papers and information (Fig. 10).

As Sheilah's project was installed throughout the week, it was important to have an event in which the community could hear her speak about her work directly. We decided to do an artist presentation inside the Chinese restaurant, Yap's Place, which was attached to the gas station. Wilson shared an array of works she had completed that related to Nova Scotia, its history and mythology, including *The Invisible Inside the Visible*. After a number of failed attempts Sheilah had discovered the Seaview racetrack with the help of local resident Ross MacKay, a stunning Google earth image and an array of oral directions. What I found intriguing, was that this work combined notions of place from so many angles. On the one hand Sheilah was performing historical research, much in the vein of other folklorists who recorded and transcribed oral histories. Yet I was also interested in how Sheilah's comparison of the physical site of the racetrack to Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) invited new ways to think about disappearing sites in rural places. The racetrack, like Smithson's work is only visible during two seasons of the year. Sheilah's gesture encourages new ways of re-thinking how place occupies our memory and imagination.

In regards to the visiting artist programme of the W(here) Festival, I felt it important to include contemporary practices wherein the artists worked directly with community members. In part, this type of work has the potential to be much more accessible since the viewer can see their own story in the piece. In this way, I was intrigued by Sheilah's bravery to engage with local residents but also transform their stories into an imaginative telling that combines oral and visual methods. Like the racetrack itself, Sheilah's temporary intervention into a social space, the gas station, occupies a precarious balance between being there and not there, real and imagined. Can a story be a place? In this project the racetrack is evoked more strongly through overlapping stories than the physical location itself as many residents know its location yet have never been, as Sheilah states, "the intangible mark and the tangible story".

On June 29<sup>th</sup> we began the morning in New Glasgow with the final day of award ceremonies with Marlene Creates. These awards, which were installed throughout the county are also available to be viewed online via Google Map (Fig. 6) through the festival's website. Residents who were unable to attend the festival first hand have the option to virtually visit each location or add their own. This aspect of *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* incorporates Graham and Cook's (2010) notion of online site-specificity, noted in the curatorial essay (see page 18) as a way to link artworks about place and global technologies. Moreover, the



website allows for the project to be open-ended, incorporating new stories about place, a beginning rather than an ending.

In the afternoon, another group of participants gathered at the gazebo next to the Royal Canadian Legion in River John. There, professional authors, Linda Little and Sheree Fitch, introduced their field-trip *From the Bridge*. Both of these authors have been deeply impacted by the place that they live, Linda having transformed the village itself into fiction and Sheree its sights, sounds and smells. Linda Little's novel *Scotch River* populates the physical reality of River John with fictional characters, and there on the old iron bridge, the imagined cowboy came to life as we listened. Like us, he stood on the iron bridge with the wind whipping through the rails and up the riverbed (Fig. 13). On the bridge site merged with story, fiction overlapped onto reality and site-specificity moved between the imagined and the real, complexifying notions of local storytelling and oral history.

Afterwards we walked to Sheree's home where she led a writing workshop considering the concept of a bridge more deeply (Fig. 14). Some wrote about actual bridges they had known in Halifax and the United Kingdom while others considered the bridge as a metaphor, sometimes as simple as a kiss. From the specific of *this* bridge to the very broad idea of *the* bridge, Linda and Sheree's

field trip exploded our very notions of place and its application in our imagination.

That evening at Pictou Academy, a local high school, we came together for a critical discussion about creating art in rural communities and art in this community (Fig.15). *Here Today Here Tomorrow* was initially conceptualized to be a panel discussion with the invited artists, however with so much community participation it was re-imagined to be a place where residents could ask critical questions, where they could lead the discussion, and to look to the future. Operating as an open think-tank event, participants gathered in a circle to discuss similar projects by the invited artists and new possible ventures.

The conversation ranged from the logistical (how to build audience for art projects in rural communities) to the psychological (motivating artists to be braver). Many agreed that projects such as the W(here) Festival had the potential to create “a ripple effect” that could translate into regenerative possibilities of the rural space. Indeed at times, fostering generosity and a sense of openness within the community, creating moments where artists are “present”, seemed more important than presenting artworks they produce. This speaks to the strong desire of artists working in rural communities to connect with like-minded individuals for there is indeed a sense of isolation and alienation from one another and their communities for the kind of work that they do. The conversation also veered into

territories of rural economy and how the creative industry might improve local conditions through supporting active creative practices.

*Here Today Here Tomorrow* brought out frustration as well, some artists feeling the desire to work in a more global way with new media technologies and audiences, while others recognized that many in this community, who are of an older generation, remain uncomfortable with such ways of working. The mixture of permanent and seasonal residents as well as visitors revealed biases derived from personal approaches, perspectives and experiences of culture at the local level. However, all recognized a need for rural communities such as Pictou County to envision new creative futures and that through discussion and collaboration possibilities become a bit clearer.

June 30<sup>th</sup> marked our last and final day of the W(here) Festival. We began early at 9am in Brookland on the Back Road. Here, Raina McDonald greeted us at the foot of her driveway for *I AM HERE* the third field-trip led by a local artist. Walking through space, Raina's field-trip was indeed a very relational experience, one that used yoga and our shared experience of walking as a methods to expand artistic thinking. During Raina's walk we thought about process, of how we become present in place. Place as seen through Raina's work was a relationship to be explored between the body and the immediate environment. Guided by McDonald, standing in a settler foundation overgrown with trees and moss, we

closed our eyes and considered place at the level of our bodies (Fig. 16). Breath mediating our presence, we imagined standing in the very same place 200 years ago when the house still stood and its residents occupied it.

Exploring place externally we walked into the woods, noticing how our senses and our constantly chattering minds interpret our surroundings (Fig. 17). At times the path was more tunnel than road, the canopy of trees closing overhead, secreting us somewhere. Suddenly we would be thrust into a bright meadow and then back into darkness again. At the end of our journey, we came to a valley where a cabin stood by a meandering stream. This place seemed so very unreal, yet so recognizable in its archetypal familiarity – the artist's cabin.

Later in the afternoon we joined Sharon Nowlan for the final field-trip of the week. *Where the Sky Meets the Sea* was perhaps the most elemental in its investigation of place, for Sharon works directly with the physical material, beach stone, to create her work. On a smooth sand canvas, a group of residents worked together to create a beach stone tapestry to be incorporated into the *World Beach Project* hosted by the Victoria & Albert Museum (London). In a conversation after the event was over it was clear that the most important part of Sharon's project was the collaborative aspect (Fig. 18). The image created would wash away with the next tide, but the conversation and memory of the project would remain in the minds of all those who participated (Fig. 19). It is also important to

note that many of the participants at this final event were people we had met earlier in the week. After experiencing one event they decided to come to each event thereafter. And so the bonds between this temporary art audience grew stronger over the five days, becoming more familiar and jovial.

Soon however, we found ourselves at the last event of the festival. Site Media Inc. (David Craig and Katherine Knight) had embarked on a very special project that again, interpreted and archived place in distinctive manner. *Memory Factory* is essentially an online memory bank where stories about the Maritime Packers lobster factory and cannery in Caribou are again given a space to exist and come alive. The factory, which was torn down, no longer exists. From a curatorial point of view, I was intrigued to end the festival with a launch, a beginning of something new as so many of the experiences of the past few days were only just scratching the surface of possibility here in this rural place.

At the historic Palace Theatre in downtown Pictou, David Craig shared with us the development of *Memory Factory* and how one could still become involved if they too had a story to tell about Maritime Packers (Fig. 20). The seventy or so people who had gathered for this event were deeply interested in the history of this place, some who worked at the factory themselves and many being prominent leaders in the community. It was heartening to see such a strong support for this work as it merges both storytelling and digital media giving evidence to this idea

of rural place existing simultaneously within the globalized world as well (Fig. 21).

The evening ended with a concert by Al Tuck, a singer songwriter from Prince Edward Island, who recounted stories through song about his own sense of place as it related to his time here in Pictou (Fig. 22). Having accidentally arrived an entire day early to the festival, Al had visited a nearby graveyard where a family member was rumoured to rest. Al, who never plays the same set twice, then constructed a set of songs which related to his day's experience in this place, many a graveyard and ghost haunting his tunes.



Figure 1. *kitchen pARTy* – Fenn Martin artist presentation, 2012.



Figure 2. *kitchen pARTy* – audience view, 2012.



Figure 3. Marlene Creates, *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* - residents talk through ideas, 2012.



Figure 4. Marlene Creates, *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* - mapping and award making, 2012.





Figure 5. Marlene Creates, *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* - Johnny Burns awards Bellow's Island, Waterside Beach Provincial Park, 2012.



Figure 6. Marlene Creates, *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* - installation view of Margaret Nicholson's award and Google Map version, 2012.



Figure 7. Susan Sellers, *Following the Footsteps of an Unsung Heroine*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – participants walk the Road on Pictou Island, 2012.



Figure 8. Susan Sellers, *Following the Footsteps of an Unsung Heroine*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – Sellers presentation and Margaret's hymn, 2012.





Figure 9. Sheilah Wilson, *The Invisible Inside the Visible* – outdoor installation view, 2012.



Figure 10. Sheilah Wilson, *The Invisible Inside the Visible* – indoor installation view, 2012.



Figure 11. Sheilah Wilson, *The Invisible Inside the Visible* – artist presentation, 2012.



Figure 12. Sheilah Wilson, *The Invisible Inside the Visible* – audience view, 2012.





Figure 13. Linda Little and Sheree Fitch, *From the Bridge*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – on the bridge and Linda reading, 2012.



Figure 14. Linda Little and Sheree Fitch, *From the Bridge*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – Sheree guides the writing workshop, 2012.



Figure 15. Raina McDonald, *I AM HERE*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – participants gather in the settler foundation, 2012.



Figure 16. Raina McDonald, *I AM HERE*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – participants walking and rooted in place, 2012.





Figure 17. Sharon Nowlan, *Where the Sky Meets the Sea*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – Collaborative making and finding material, 2012.



Figure 18. Sharon Nowlan, *Where the Sky Meets the Sea*, a part of *Walking in Place: Field Trips by Local Artists* series – finished work, 2012.





Figure 19. *Here Today Here Tomorrow* – participants gather, 2012.



Figure 20. Site Media Inc., *Memory Factory* project launch – David Craig presents, 2012.



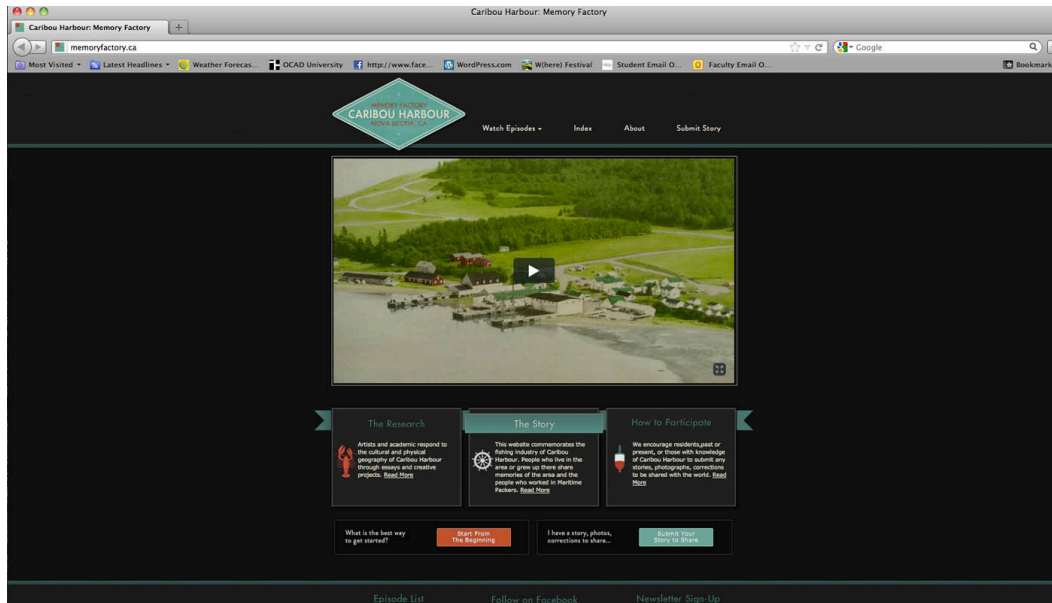


Figure 21. Site Media Inc., *Memory Factory* – screen capture, 2012.



Figure 21. Closing reception with Al Tuck, 2012.

## **Active Research**

When I began this project, I looked to discussions within my own discipline, curating, and that of art-practice to define working methods I would employ to develop and actualize the W(here) Festival. I was intrigued by artists and curators who take their relationship with their audiences very seriously, often working collaboratively to create art experiences. Chief amongst these were art historian and curator Grant Kester (2004) and artist Suzanne Lacy (1995) whose focus on dialogue in the development phase of artistic projects is an essential part of the work. While problematized in recent years, curator Nicolas Bourriaud's conceptions of relational aesthetics have also focused this idea of curating in/from social space that many practitioners of my generation are investigating further. However, I was taken by the call for stronger ethical positions by curators Lucy Lippard (1997), Mary Jane Jacob (2005), Miwon Kwon (2004) and indeed a wealth of community arts practitioners that champion the community's position. Working directly with residents to build projects from the ground up challenges notions of rural places as romantic backdrops for projects to happen in or travel through.

I looked across many disciplines including history to get a better understanding of the area I would be working in. Although I am from Pictou County, I had never worked there as a curator before. I wanted to go beyond the dominant narrative of Pictou County's history (that of Scottish settlement) to get a better understanding

of the complex identities I would be working amongst. Historian George Patterson's text *A history of the County of Pictou, Nova Scotia* (1877) was incredible to juxtapose mentally with Ian MacKay's *Quest of the Folk: Anti-modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (1994) both describing history through a tradition of storytelling yet conceptualizing their positions of authorial power very differently. Looking at these two texts one can see the major shift of subject bias from the linear and heroic Scottish legacy (Patterson) to a hybrid and simultaneous position (MacKay) that draws from Feminist and Post-Structuralist theory.

Larger discussions of place, that of nation-building and the Canadian identity, were also useful in expanding thinking about fixed notions of community. Cultural theorists Himani Bannerji (2000), Benedict Anderson (1991) and Northrop Frye (1971) were influential to broadening my own ideas about Pictou County. I had always felt that Pictou County's metanarrative, that we were all direct descendants of the Scots, was exclusionary to many. However, this narrative continues to pervade much of the cultural activity and memorialization in the region. For example, those of African, Aboriginal or "Other" descent including women are largely excluded from the list of prominent figures in local history. Conscious of these critical discussions brought forward by Bannerji, Anderson and Frye, the W(here) Festival took the now as a starting point and included artists from a diverse range of experience challenging who is privileged

enough to define place. This way of working attempts to speak to a more complex and nuanced historical and contemporary reality that artists and residents continue to navigate.

Another approach that I undertook to broaden these notions of privilege was to begin a conversation with the Pictou Landing First Nation, a Mi'kmaq community located in the county. I also discussed the project with a prominent Mi'kmaq artist in Nova Scotia with the intention of inviting her to be a part of the W(here) Festival. Unfortunately both of these avenues did not develop beyond initial discussions. The reasons for this are numerous, but I felt strongly that to continue these relationships we would need more time, resources and capacity to include input from this community that was simply not available. I needed to move the project forward, but I would like to note here that the potential to work with the local Aboriginal community of Pictou Landing was very much considered and an exciting avenue for future work in this region to consider.

## **Two Case Studies**

In addition to these broader cultural discussions I looked to a number of case studies that brought together contemporary art and rural places. *The Falmouth Convention* in Falmouth, UK was a festival and residency co-produced by the University College Falmouth, ProjectBase and Tate St. Ives in 2010. The 2010 *ReMode Control: re-thinking the idea of remote* conference on Fogo Island in

Newfoundland also explored many ideas such as partnership, sustainability and inter-disciplinary practices that were tangential to discussions within the W(here) Festival. While these projects had significantly more financial capital than the W(here) Festival, the dedication to actively collaborate with the local to explore the relationship between contemporary art and the rural was similar utilizing resident-led events and discussion. However the W(here) Festival did not work with an arts organization like the Fogo Island Arts Cooperation or Tate St. Ives that carries with it a certain sense of cultural authority. Instead, the festival's identity had to be constructed.

### **Creating an Identity On and Offline**

At the heart of the W(here) Festival there was a strong discursive element of exchange: exchange of knowledge, building new connections and collaborative making. Sharing information, establishing a sense of expertise, creating a place in which to network, these are some of the many social functions that established art institutions lend to an individual project and their artistic communities. However in Pictou County, these reciprocal relationships between artists are guided more by a sense of neighbourly encouragement than institutional exchange. And so, the festival borrowed from both social frameworks, formalizing relationships between local artists by providing specific sites and times for exchange. At the same time, the festival strove to maintain this genuine sense of camaraderie between local artists.

Another aspect of identity that the W(here) Festival adopted was a sense of local activism. What became clear was a strong need to be heard, to speak from one's place, that many artists and residents I encountered desired. Thus talking about *their* place, became a central element of the festival. While established institutions put forward their mandates and the publics that they champion, W(here) had to find its own political voice and purpose in regards to the local artistic communities.

The creation of a virtual space to house information about the project (Appendix D) was one way that this social function was performed. The website and related Facebook page were places where both local residents and I could communicate. As I lived in Toronto during most of the research and development phase, these virtual spaces proved to be important curatorial tools to reach across geographical gaps between curator, partners, artists and audiences housing information about upcoming meetings, schedules and artist biographies. For the first time, the website provided a visual network of local artists rather than a series of siloed individuals whereby artists may recognize themselves a part of larger artistic communities.

Perhaps most importantly the W(here) Festival website now functions as a place for documentation, a virtual after-life. Online, the festival lives on through field reports that were commissioned for each event (Appendix E), images and video.

The field-reports were an important strategy that allowed for a range of voices beyond my own to think through the project's legacy and to take ownership it as well. Some of the artistic projects also continue online such as Marlene Creates' project *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County*. Residents are encouraged to continue awarding meaningful places in their community and to include them on the Google Map version.

While the website was integral for some, many of the residents of Pictou County do not have Internet access. Whether they are of an older generation or for economic reasons, there remained an almost greater need for face-to-face communication and physical presence in the development of this project. In the months leading up to the festival, I began by meeting with community leaders whom I had known previously. I had also heard of the Pictou Renaissance Society, a community organization who was interested in drawing new residents to the town through supporting the arts. I began here, and word of my actions spread. Following the trail from one resident to the next I began to build a group of interested persons who became an informal community advisory group to this project.

We decided that to move forward, we would organize an event where artists and arts-minded individuals would come together. The Networking Café on November 5<sup>th</sup> 2011 was the first of a number of community meetings held in

Pictou County. The café welcomed 35 or so arts practitioners from across the county, many of whom who were meeting for the first time ever. Through speed-dating, artists were given a space to talk about their work, and confidence began to grow. This potential for connection alone put artists “in the right mood” as one resident put it, which grew over the year, culminating in the W(here) Festival and a number of other new initiatives (discussed later in section four).

Over the year I continued building connections and audiences on the ground, seeking advice, securing spaces, hosting an additional community meetings on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2012 and with youth on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2012 at the local high school. However it was not until I travelled to Pictou County on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012 to set up a physical office space that the festival’s presence within the community really took off. For being there physically, made the project real.

The festival headquarters was located in a prominent historic building in downtown Pictou between two banks. In the interim periods between community visits, I had been communicating with participants mainly via email and phone. But by adding face-to-face communication, the project was opened to a wide range of newcomers. For unless one had been to a community meeting, read the local paper, or known the website, the project would have gone by unnoticed. But everyone who walked by recognized the festival headquarters as a new place in town and many came in, asked questions, told stories and gave advice. Some



were artists themselves and were eager to tell me about their work, others were interested in the re-development of the local economy, others discussed rural life, feminism, media, the loss of youth, the building itself, my family, this community, this place, *this* place.

As one person with whom I spoke recognized, working here as I was, one had to adapt to every person who came in the door, to find a way of speaking with them. In rural communities, this colloquial manner is the way one has to work. Respect for each other's position and partnerships both formal and informal are necessities for survival. Here, personal life and work life are intensely integrated. If one is too self-interested, then the stigma of being from away or being seen apart from the community's interests becomes a significant barrier to overcome. And so, to open up new possibilities, residents must come together to think of ways to stay vibrant, for if not, they disappear. In addition, as there are few institutions to look to for support, these methods of conviviality form the basis from which new projects are built.

In this way, I believe the tradition of storytelling in Nova Scotia plays well with sociologist Scott Lash's observation (made in the curatorial essay) of the shift in contemporary practices from the art object to the art objective. Furthermore, if place is a lived experience as Lucy Lippard notes, and performed by the W(here) Festival then storytelling from a variety of points of view and languages (visual

and oral) can be an active and accessible way to present this new work in rural places like Pictou County.

### **Partnership and Collaboration**

Throughout the development of the W(here) Festival, some of the informal connections created became solid partnerships. For example, with the support of the Pictou Renaissance Society, the W(here) Festival was able to apply to the Province of Nova Scotia's Department of Communities Culture and Heritage for project funding. The Cultural Activities Program provided the Pictou Renaissance Society with the financial capital to cover all of the artist fees. In addition the Pictou Renaissance Society gave the festival additional support by sharing its network and information. The festival also received support from the Pictou Business and Marketing Society and individual donors in the community.

On a project by project basis, the W(here) Festival also sought out interesting partner locations. For instance, Meh Yap's business in River John became the perfect site to host Sheilah Wilson's project *The Invisible Inside the Visible* as this location was already a social space for sharing local knowledges. It did not seem strange at all to set up an artist presentation there, in fact, at the end of Sheilah's presentation we were welcomed back by Meh herself "anytime after 2pm or the afternoon lunch rush".

With more time and consideration the potential for building partnerships could be explored more fully. This method of working makes viable the presentation of contemporary art in small communities. Indeed, many of the artists themselves already realized this, evident in David Craig and Katherine Knight of Site Media Inc.'s partnership with the Northumberland Fisheries Museum. The Museum is a local historical record keeper for the fishing industry in the area, and although not an art institution, understood the project's dedication to preserving history through visual methods in *Memory Factory*.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

This project was challenging on a number of levels. As mentioned above I was not working with an established gallery or art institution. Therefore, I could not assume my audience, the space in which to present the work, any installation staff, equipment or public relations support, branding or indeed the very narrative of cultural significance that comes with showing work in a gallery. Yet I began to think about all of the community players that I was encountering acting as various departments within an institution, each a different stakeholder in the project. For example, there were some interested in the economic impact for Pictou County while others were more supportive of the experimental presentation and social possibilities for artists living in the area.

While not working with an established presentation space or cultural organization, created a lot more work for me as curator (not being assured many of the above items) it was also incredibly freeing. I was not beholden to a specific mandate therefore was in a position to be more responsive to issues that arose and the project could evolve as it progressed. In addition, the project was not tied to one particular physical site. Alternative sites such as the Bayview Community Hall and Pictou Academy were extremely welcoming of this project. We were able to secure these sites for minimal to zero financial cost to the project. I am certain that similar spaces in larger urban areas would never be offered so freely. Similarly generous with their labour and knowledge, residents were eager to point me in the right direction to borrow sound equipment, ferry us to Pictou Island, or print schedules and posters.

However, one of the hardest parts of organizing the W(here) Festival was maintaining momentum in-between scheduled visits to Pictou County. This gave way to some tension as I was both here and away. As I lived in Toronto for much of the year, and worked over email and telephone, logistically these methods could only get me so far. Even the fact that I had a Toronto area code I am sure was a hindrance for some participants and residents interested in learning about the project. When I did visit the community, I always felt a great desire to stay and work things out on the ground. Trust is built much more effectively face-to-face especially in new communities and to organize a project about place from a

far away one seemed counter intuitive. However once I was on the ground in the weeks prior to the festival, things moved incredibly fast with the aid of my local phone number and physical presence.

There are a number of benefits to working in small communities as curators and cultural organizers. It became apparent that supporting one another was a way of life, a currency of exchange that could be harnessed to grow audiences. I began attending and partaking in other artists' and community events including a talk at the local library with graduates from NSCAD University, a dinner with the Nova Scotia Leadership Council, the New Glasgow farmers market, a luncheon with the Pictou rug hookers and Artisans In Action, another locally led initiative that puts makers and their work on display throughout the town of Pictou. I also attended a number of community meetings and made formal presentation to the Pictou Renaissance Society and the Town of Pictou.

While I was only physically in the area four weeks or so leading up to the festival, these connections were important to building a presence for the festival and an identity for myself within the artistic community. The fact that this was a temporal event or that I did not live there on a regular basis did not matter, communities here welcome those with ideas and energy to get things done. Giving back by showing genuine interest in the work of the artists who live there helped me understand these communities better.

One final challenge I would like to discuss is the engagement of youth in the W(here) Festival. I began by organizing a meeting with young artists at the local high school, however, soon realized that youth participation would require much more attention than I could successfully manage with my financial and time constraints. Like many of the relationships built for this festival, youth participation had to be developed at a local level and be meaningful to both parties. While youth participated at various programmed events during the festival, I had hoped that some might become involved as artists or volunteers. The W(here) Festival would have been a great opportunity for young arts-minded individuals to participate and learn. After all, I was first introduced to the arts not through school but by becoming involved in a community art class. On a more practical level, youth could have assisted with day-to-day tasks for the festival for example poster making, “gallery sitting” the festival headquarters and giving out information. In the future, I would like to see more engagement between artists and youth in the Pictou County community for I believe this is a relationship to be developed further.

## **PART IV: Legacy**

### **Community and Curatorial Perspectives**

In analyzing the impact the W(here) Festival has on contemporary curatorial practices, two different yet related perspectives become apparent. On the one

hand, this project was from, about and directed for the local communities of Pictou County. In this way, the W(here) Festival has a very real impact on the local artistic communities and residents who live there. Their genuine inquisitive disposition and generosity was compounded and formalized by a festival of this nature. Moreover the festival's openness to a variety of experiences, knowledges and disciplines affect how we might see curating in contemporary art.

Beginning this process at some of my early community meetings, almost every artist began their introduction with language such as "I dabble in" or "I play with". While play and experimentation are not bad qualities, the tone said it all, the description serving to undercut the importance of their work. I was not terribly surprised that artists felt a bit second-cousin to others as they did not have many opportunities to come together and compare practices through discussion. This is due, in part, to a fear of judgment in relation to each other and to urban artistic practices. I made a mental note to check back with this attitude later in this project, and I am happy to report that I did not hear words like "dabble" used at all during the W(here) Festival's *kitchen pARTy*. Even though many artists were presenting their work to the public for the first time that evening they had found greater confidence.

Part of this impact was fostered at the end of the Networking Café in November 2011. The participants (independent of myself) made three agreements. First to

meet on a more regular basis, second, to begin the process of forming a local arts committee and third, to approach the local newspaper to host a regular arts column. I see these kinds of outcomes as tangential effects of the research itself which gives evidence to my belief that community based curatorial practices is an active, generative practice, not something that we consider only when a project is completed. Curating does not happen in a bubble, or even in the safety of a gallery, but in the real world by fostering relationships between institutions, artists and audiences.

On a psychological level, I believe that the W(here) Festival has instigated a greater self-confidence within the variation of local artistic communities. It has shown by example that their practices and their place matters. On a personal note, I am very excited to see what the community makes of its newfound sense of connection, energy and bravery. The festival has also shown how a temporary event may indeed fulfill some of the social functions of art institutions including exchange, networking and providing a discursive and physical space to present artwork.

Since the W(here) Festival, the local arts community has invested in a small studio space. Named the Art 2 Sea Studio, it opened in June 2012. This is an artist-run initiative to sell, teach and present work to the public. Made up of a core group of six artists who met at the Networking Café, this endeavor is a huge step



towards creating a more public and creative future for Pictou County! Artists were always here, but this project has shown a variety of ways that work can be presented with minimal infrastructure and maximum possibility. Rural places do not necessarily need big galleries with beautiful white walls and an expansive budget, but they do need opportunities to come together and make plans from the inside out. It is my hope that the energy and dedication to share local art practices publically created via the W(here) Festival is continued by artists within Pictou County.

In terms of impact on the larger discourse of curatorial practices, I feel strongly that the W(here) Festival has shown how curating may exist in unusual places, beyond urban centres. This project has shown examples of how artists of all experiences, and disciplines can participate in this kind of cultural experience. Going beyond the visual arts, this project curated storytellers, musicians, authors and teachers. Interesting discussions occur through the cross-pollination of experiences and knowledges. For example the juxtaposition of professional critical practices such as Marlene Creates's *Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County* with Susan Sellers *Following in the Footsteps of an Unsung Heroine* both explore personal and local histories through excursion. In this way it is important for curators as cultural organizers to remember that facilitating art experiences such as these are beginnings and not endings, and that in rural places, practices exist simultaneously.

I would also add here the challenge of defining terms to talk about Pictou County. Throughout this essay, I have used the term rural to describe the socio-geography of the area. However rural is often seen in opposition to urban, a binary relationship that privileges one above the other especially when we speak of cultural practices. Other terms to describe non-urban such as countryside, hinterland, margins, periphery, etc. similarly deny the possibilities of rich complex artistic practices. The limitations of these terms challenge artists, curators and critics to define a more positive and nuanced language from which rural arts practitioners may work from that more accurately reflects their daily experience. For in reality, places such as Pictou County are not simply “rural”, but complexly so. Pictou County is a combination of towns, villages, country and shorelines. Furthermore, artists who work here live just as rich and cultured lives as their neighbours in the city. As a result, their work is equally complex and deserving of a more constructive language and further study.

This essay has largely explored the curatorial process and not the individual artists works. The selected projects could be situated in a wide range of current contemporary art discourses from relational aesthetics to participatory art, performance art, walking as art, community practices and theories of site-specificity. However many of these artists themselves may not describe their work in this way. This poses an interesting question about the relationship between curator and artist when experiences and contexts vary so profoundly. On a

personal level, I have come to acknowledge that the individual artworks are received on multiple levels. For example, to some the experience of Sharon Nowlan's project *Where the Sky Meets the Sea* was a family friendly afternoon at the beach. For others, it was an exercise in collaborative art making. The question then is not what definition should we choose to discuss, but to whom shall we address this conversation.

To recognize that curating in what are perceived to be and experienced as a "rural" place is no simple task. It can be daunting to develop a project such as the W(here) Festival without an established art presentation centre. However there are many local networks that are open to partnership and exchange proving that rural places are potentially very rich sites in which to foster new connections, to collaborate with residents and design and present a projects which include contemporary art. It is with this potential to define a more imbedded practice within rural communities that the W(here) Festival sought to operate and suggests that new relationships between artists, communities, the local and the global further conversation and explore new terrain, both discursive and geographic.

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## **Accompanying Material**

The following accompanying material is upon request from the OCAD University Library:

### **Appendix A: W(here) Festival Program and Poster**

Enclosed in envelope

### **Appendix B: Sheilah Wilson's *Invisible Inside the Visible* newspaper**

Enclosed in envelope

Anyone requesting the material may view it in the OCAD University Library or pay to have it copied for personal use.

## **Appendix C: Website Screenshots**

The W(here) Festival is located online at [www.wherfestival.ca](http://www.wherfestival.ca) and on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/wherfestival>.

Below are three screenshots from the festival website and Facebook page.

# W(HERE) FESTIVAL

Pictou County Nova Scotia | June 26-30 2012

[MEDIA](#) [FIELD REPORTS](#) [EVENT SCHEDULE](#) [AWARD RIBBONS FOR PLACES](#) [ARTISTS](#) [ABOUT](#) [HOME](#)  
[THANK YOU AND SUPPORT](#) [SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES](#) [PARTICIPATE](#)

**FEB 28 2012**

**1 COMMENT**

**HAPPENINGS**

**EDIT**

## HOME SWEET HOME

Every festival needs a home base!

For the month of June leading up to the W(here) Festival (June 26-30) we will be located on the bottom floor of the old Stonehouse building on Water Street in Pictou. Here, we will host volunteer meetings, media events and maybe even an art making workshop for youth! Its still a bit early yet, but when we've set up shop please feel free to stop in anytime to visit.

I may have gotten carried away on photoshop today, but check out the results! **How would you imagine your perfect community meeting spot?** An indoor garden like this one? Or how about a pictou county pizza oven and a room full of instruments? I bet Dave Gunning would like that space!

A big thank you to Karla MacFarlane for inviting this festival into her space at the old Stonehouse.



Share this: [Press This](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

Like this: [★ Like](#) Be the first to like this.

One thought on "home sweet home"



Jeanne Rutherford says:

May 23, 2012 at 6:03 am (Edit)

Home page, W(here) Festival website, screenshot, available at <http://www.wherfestival.ca>, August 29, 2012



# W(HERE) FESTIVAL

Pictou County Nova Scotia | June 26-30 2012

MEDIA FIELD REPORTS EVENT SCHEDULE **AWARD RIBBONS FOR PLACES** ARTISTS ABOUT HOME  
THANK YOU AND SUPPORT SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES PARTICIPATE

1 COMMENT

## AWARD RIBBONS FOR PLACES

EDIT

Discover a new way of imagine this place we call Pictou County!

For this project, visiting artist Marlene Creates from Newfoundland invited participants of all ages to share some of their meaningful places in Pictou — either natural or built — in order to reveal some of its invisible layers of meaning.

Participants created an award ribbon, which they installed in their chosen spot and a video was taken of their story.

Explore the map found [here](#) by clicking on the various blue markers. This map will be updated over the next few weeks with the participants in Marlene's project happenign June 27-29 2012.



Do you want to add your special place?

1. Think about a place in Pictou County that is meaningful to you. How would you describe this place to a friend?
2. Write a short description of the place (50-100 words)
3. You may also film a short 1 minute clip of yourself at your chosen location and upload this video to youtube (directions [how](#)) or vimeo (directions [here](#)) if you're not quite sure about this step, please feel free to contact the festival for help.
4. Send the description, photo, link to video as well as the approximate address of your location to [wherfestival@gmail.com](mailto:wherfestival@gmail.com).
5. An administrator will upload your awarded location to the map!

### About the artist

Marlene Creates is an acclaimed environmental artist and poet who lives and works in Portugal Cove, Newfoundland. For over thirty years her work has been an exploration of the relationship between human experience, memory, language and the land, and the impact they have on each other.

Share this:


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Award Ribbons for Places in Pictou County, W(ere) Festival website, screenshot, available <http://wherfestival.ca/award-ribbons-for-places>, August 29, 2012

facebook Search for people, places and things Mary MacDonald

You are posting, commenting, and liking as Mary MacDonald — Change to W(her) Festival

W(her) Festival Timeline June Highlights Admin Panel




**Event Schedule**  
wherfestival.ca

The W(her) Festival will take place June 26 to 30, 2012 in Pictou Nova Scotia! Highlights of the festival include: - local resident/artist-led "field trips" throughout Pictou County ...

Like · Comment · Share 1

30 people saw this post




**W(her) Festival**  
June 23

w(her) excited for Tuesday! (schedules/posters now available at 13 Water Street in Pictou!)

Like · Comment · Share

49 people saw this post



**W(her) Festival**  
June 21

If anyone is heading to the New Glasgow area today, we have lots of posters that would like to take a ride with you! :)


Like · Comment · Share

52 people saw this post



**W(her) Festival** shared a link.  
June 21

We're on the hunt for a few excellent volunteers and various odds and ends for the W(her) Festival next week! Check out the link below if this sounds interesting to you.



**Participate**  
wherfestival.ca

There are many ways that you can participate in the W(her) Festival, from being a part of visiting artists projects to volunteering. More information below on

Like · Comment · Share 2

54 people saw this post



**W(her) Festival** shared a link.  
June 16

The real question is what's next Pictou County? Check out today's feature event during W(her), June 29 at Pictou Academy!



**HERE TODAY HERE TOMORROW**

**Today's Feature Event: "Here Today Here Tomorrow", discussion at Pictou Academy, JUNE 29, 7pm**  
wherfestival.ca

7pm - Here Today Here Tomorrow an interactive discussion about Art, Place and Community with

Like · Comment · Share

**W(her) Festival**  
June 24

What is your favorite place in the summertime?

This week, the windows of 13 Water Street in Pictou feature drawings by Pictou Elementary primary students answering that very question! Just another way that the W(her) Festival explores place, art and community!




Like · Comment · Share 2

Debbie Lamey MacDonald likes this.

**Debbie Lamey MacDonald** Love children's art!  
June 24 at 9:06pm · Like


Write a comment...

74 people saw this post



**W(her) Festival**  
June 20

It's a schedule folding party down here at 13 Water Street today!!! We are very excited about our new posters. Helpers welcome. :)



W(her) Festival Facebook Fan Page, screenshot, available <http://www.facebook.com/wherfestival>, August 29, 2012

## Appendix D: Field Reports

At the various events of the W(here) Festival, certain artists and residents were asked to document their experience at various events in a field report. Many of the nine reporters were intimately involved in this project and so their perspective is incredibly valuable to new audiences happening upon this project via the W(here) Festival website.

The format of the report was up to its author but examples include a descriptive narrative, series of photographs, personal reflection, list or poem. The goal was to document W(here) in a number of ways and voices, so it would not live on in a multitude of voices from the communities of Pictou County.

Included here are the field-reports for Sharon Nowlan's project *Where Sky Meets the Sea* at Waterside Beach by Anna Kate Newman and Linda Little and Sheree Fitch's project *From the Bridge* by Rita Wilson.

Field Reports are published online via the festival website at <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports/>.

*Where Sky Meets the Sea* was one of four field-trips led by local artists. As Sharon Nowlan's work naturally begins with a walk on the beach so did this adventure. Collecting stones participants constructed a large beach drawing. Afterwards the result was uploaded to the *World Beach Project* and online database of beach-art hosted by the Victoria and Albert Museum (London).

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### **FIELD REPORT**

We meet Sharon in the parking lot of the beach. She looks like a beach veteran: tan and happy under a wide-brimmed sun hat. She's been collecting beach pebbles forever, she says, creating one-of-a-kind artworks that sell in shops across Nova Scotia and on [Etsy](#).

Her pebbles normally sit in frames and under glass but today she wants us to help her create something together. Both Mary MacDonald (curator) and Sharon have been discussing submitting today's project for the [World Beach Project](#), an interactive, worldwide collection of beach artworks created by anyone, anywhere.

Sharon's ready and so are we. Fueled by her cooler filled with ice tea and water we start down the wooden boardwalk to the beach that has carried thousands of tourists, families, and friends down to the popular Waterside Beach located off of the Sunrise Trail in Pictou County, Nova Scotia.



photo courtesy of Anna Kate Newman

She knows what she is looking for. A perfect piece of unblemished beach. Hard to find in a place where people, dogs, birds, and other wildlife roam free. We drop our things and surround a perfect rectangle. Then we laugh when one of our own walk right through it. No big deal. Some of us drop to our knees and start creating

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 1/6

our space, removing bits of seaweed, pebbles, wood, and smoothing the surface. Transforming it into an earthen canvas.



photo courtesy of W(ere) Festival

We start to get curious looks from the nearby groups. How strange our group must look. Staring intently, pointing and discussing a strange, seemingly random spot on the sand. To onlookers we must look like people sure of unearthing pirate treasure.

Sharon passes around pictures of other World Beach Projects and then shows us a sketch of a medallion that we will try to create. Circular patterns within a larger circle, complete with spokes connecting inner circles to larger circles. Oozing with symmetry.

Now it's time to collect. Every project of Sharon's starts with collection. *How does her poor back survive such process?* She passes out plastic baggies and instructs us to pick up whatever we want. Just pick up similar things, similar shape and with similar colour.

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 2/6



photo courtesy of W(here) Festival

Our group is growing. More people have found us and have begun listening in, observing, and helping. The onlookers must think they have it figured out - *Ahh! It's a scavenger hunt!*

I decide to look for small, circular grey pebbles. And then I laugh – *aren't they all grey?* When you get closer down you do see variation in the colours. People announce they are collecting brown, white, peach-coloured, etc. I fill my bag slowly and vow the next bag will be filled with BIG rocks.

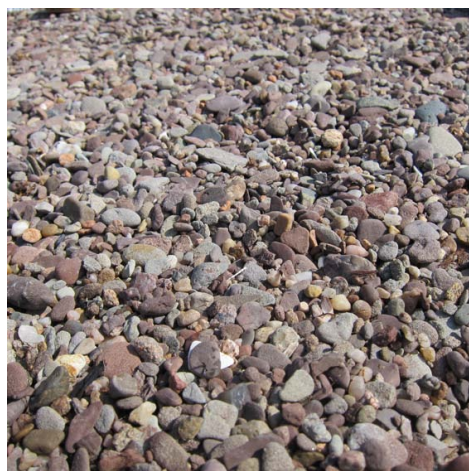


photo courtesy of W(here) Festival

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 3/6



I imagine what Sharon's studio must look like. She must have little bins and containers filled with pebbles of different shapes, colours, and sizes. Is it chaotic with pebbles spilling everywhere or is she overly organized with rows and rows? I imagine a good system would be using something like what carpenters use for nails and screws. Those cute little bins with drawers.

Collecting pebbles is kind of boring after a while. The mind drifts. Sharon isn't really collecting pebbles. She's moving around us, chatting and encouraging. I bet she is enjoying having all these worker-bees. I wonder if she pretends she's taking her kids to the beach and then makes them collect pebbles all day. That's what I would do. I wonder if her kids even like going to the beach?

Back to work. She calls us together and we dump our little collections and everyone *ohhs* and *ahhs* about how there really are different colours and shapes to be found. A few people have collected similar things and so they merge their collections. We've created our own artist's palette for sure. A place to start.



photo courtesy of W(here) Festival

The medallion has been sketched with lines in the sand and we start to envision filling in the circles, covering the lines and making it look like something else. I hope it looks good. My back hurts. The group begins to move from collecting to careful placement.

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherefestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 4/6



photo courtesy of W(here) Festival

The medallion begins to take shape and the conversation changes. Big discussions about the possibility of adding shells or maybe seaweed too help distinguish the medallion from the rest of the beach. But it soon becomes unnecessary. The pebbles are enough. We cover line after line and fill the circles. It's extremely meditative and collegial. Strangers are reaching over each other and share in the simple tasks. Conversation is easy. We communally wonder about the high tide mark. *How long will it last? Or what about the medallion itself? Does it need to be framed somehow on the beach? Will we fill in the whole medallion or will some sand remain?*



photo courtesy of Anna Kate Newman

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 5/6



In the end the afternoon ends as it begun – trudging through hot sand and gathering another ice tea off the boardwalk. I'm tempted to look back after the last one of us leaves to see the curious, shy onlookers get up off their beach towels and finally take a look at pirate treasure. And even more curious to see if they'd add to it in their own way. After all, it's no one person's project. No one can take it home and no one can purchase it. Working physically with the land, as Mary said at the beginning, is as *here* and *now* as it gets. Sharon's pebbles remind us that the land, our *place*, help guide what we work on and work towards.



photo courtesy of Anna Kate Newman

· field report by Anna Kate Newman

Field Report by Anna Kate Newman for Sharon Nowlan's field trip "Where Sky Meets the Sea", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 6/6

*From the Bridge* was one of four field trips led by local artists. Sheree Fitch and Linda Little led a troupe along a stretch of the Jitney Trail to an old iron railway bridge. Reading site-specific poetry and passages from their work featuring elements of the landscape around us, the old rail-bed and bridge were transformed through story. The reading was followed by tea and a small workshop at the artist's home.

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### **Bridges**

It was a field trip,  
a walking one,  
a piece of a festival,  
held in a rural county,  
Pictou, to be precise.

A festival called W(here),  
Where? Here!

A walking field trip  
to a bridge  
high over the River John,  
an old railroad bridge  
transmuted to a piece of the Trans Canada trail

No more trains,  
instead, three score people  
and two authors.

Linda Little had taken this bridge,  
placed it in her imagination  
and from there,  
directly into her novel, *Scotch River*.

People sat, stood, some leaned  
while she read that passage  
created for that very bridge--  
Cass coming home.

Then Sheree Fitch,  
told us how this river took hold of her,  
caused her to create  
a place to create.  
And she took us on a ferris wheel ride  
to a place of longing realized.

Field Report by Rita Wilson for Linda Little and Sheree Fitch's field trip "From the Bridge", available <http://wherfestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 1/2

After that, she took us home  
where some people took paper and pen  
others found spots to look at the river  
there was a bit of house wandering  
and the soft chatter of getting acquainted.

Annie came back with wet ringlets,  
having found a way down to the river.  
There was tea, cookies, strawberries too,  
while people gathered and some spoke  
what they had written or thought about.  
One man told about his grandfather,  
who had “walked the line”  
surveying for a railroad that has already  
come and gone.

There were thoughts about life,  
about bridges,  
words spoken in a direct line  
from hearts  
opened  
by a walk  
a field trip  
a festival.

*- field report by Rita Wilson*

Field Report by Rita Wilson for Linda Little and Sheree Fitch’s field trip “From the Bridge”,  
available <http://wherefestival.ca/field-reports>, August 29, 2012, 2/2