The Vernacular Curatorial Imagination: Support Paper

By

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Abstract

Small-scale, often rural, art spaces offer a personal and intuitive alternative to contemporary art's usual global hegemony. Grounded in everyday experience, these hyper-focused "micro-museums," roadside attractions, and artist-built environments, curated by individuals, small collectives, or communities rather than by larger arts institutions or provincial governments, are spaces that offer possibilities in "vernacular curation." With a focus on folk and outsider art, found objects, and personal archives, these collections are made fully visible to visitors and operate through the vision of dedicated volunteers, artists, and curators. Through interviews with the artist-curators of a selection of these spaces along the Canadian-American East Coast, an examination is provided of how workshops, classes, consignment, and exhibitions use storytelling, intuitive assemblage of objects, and accessible materials to share cultural knowledge.

By framing these sites as examples of vernacular curation, an argument is made for a more inclusive understanding of curation—one that values creativity, regional identity, and lived experience. This project aims to better understand how these spaces function as meaningful niche archives and public art experiences. It also asks how their values might inform or challenge mainstream curatorial practices.

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I acknowledge that this land called Tkaronto, Ontario, where I am privileged to live and work, and where this project was developed, is governed by Treaty 13 and the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement. This land is the traditional, unceded territory of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. Tkaronto has always been a meeting place, and today the city is home to Indigenous peoples from many nations, as well as settlers and immigrants from around the world. By way of the great Shawnee leader Tecumseh, who was born in and fought for an Indigenous Ohio, and later died fighting to defend Indigenous lands in Ontario, I also acknowledge the land that generously provided for my growth and development in the Southeastern Ohio region of the Ohio River Valley. This land is the unceded territory of the Shawnee and Ohio Valley tribes and

continues to serve as a home for many Lenape (Delaware), Miami, Ottawa, Seneca, Cherokee, and Wyandot peoples who sought refuge in Ohio in the late-18th century.

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Appendix A: *The Vernacular Curatorial Imagination*, Book, 2026. This accompanying digital material, titled The_Vernacular_Curatorial_Imagination.pdf, is available for download.

Introduction

This curated collection of interviews, *The Vernacular Curatorial Imagination Vol. 1*, represents a survey of spaces of vernacular character taken while road tripping for two weeks in July of 2025; leaving from Toronto, traveling through the Canadian Maritimes, and making my way back through New England. This journey is represented by vintage maps placed throughout the publication, harkening back to how these spaces are intended to be encountered: intuitively via travel by car, framed by impressions of the surrounding environment, and often impromptu. The spaces of concern, the Hanson Sculpture Garden and Gallery, the Charles MacDonald Concrete House Museum, the Hooked Rug Museum of North America, and the Museum of Everyday Life, in the manner I have curated them, provide a broad overview of the varying operations, object interpretations, demographics, time periods, visitor engagements, exhibition styles, themes, and modes of founding afforded by the vernacular curatorial imagination.

I sought out sites that tell contemporary everyday stories of institutionally under-acknowledged relevance, conveyed by intuitively assembled displays of highly specific collections and displays. Sites' focus ranges from the rare to the mass-produced, the aesthetically refined to the comedic and otherwise amusing—that serve not only to educate but to subvert, intentionally or otherwise, institutionally restrictive, or otherwise hegemonic, preconceptions of curated space. The sites chosen in this study are intended to establish the vernacular curatorial imagination as a zone that resists any category but its own, and that reflects contemporary themes or styles exclusive to vernacular concern. These sites reflect philosophies born out of their environment and their creators' own idiosyncrasies, with little influence from a single canon. They resist metropolitan museums' institutionally imposed, misguided, and often limiting

objectivities and histories, instead reflecting only the artist's or community's critical yet underrepresented subjective experiences and perceptions.

Further, the vernacular curator resists traditional forms of institutional viability, not through active resistance, but in that their work is so contextually rooted. Little effort is made to tailor the vernacular space for an audience that does not already appreciate the interpretational nuances artistically intended. The artist-curators simply have stories to tell, whether they be free-associative, local, historical, fantastical, familial, devotional, and/or nonsensical. These creatives make things intuitively, as opposed to academically or commercially. They are local, and their audience must be purposeful in visiting in ways different from the tourism economy of conventional, established, elite, and culturally celebrated institutions. Sites are ephemeral, often living and dying, at least in the spirit of the founder's contagious passion, with the passing of said founder.

The vernacular curated space, however important, is equally hard to promote or capitalize upon. The vernacular artist-curator's ego is hard to pin down; they rarely take clear credit for their work, nor is the work made portable in a way that allows it to be confined to a plinth, frame, or traditional museum hall. Although the condescending market imposed nostalgic, naive, or romantic quality of the vernacular artist-curator is perhaps similarly valorized to how folk art has been,[1] the vernacular curated space cannot be similarly invested in the moment it becomes commercially attractive, and thus appropriated, as these spaces fundamentally cannot be removed from their geography. Even resident tourist boards have a challenging time accepting vernacular sites in their own backyards. Despite there often being a need for unique sites to attract visitors, institutional tourism is unable to fully take control of these sites due to the

[1]Ian McKay, *Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2009).

unconcealable personal voice of the creator, as well as the often rural or economically and socially "undesirable" nature of the neighbourhoods in which these vernacular spaces reside.[2]

Perhaps sites of vernacular curation are of an ephemeral, outdated model. Historically, what little income had maintained these spaces had come from the explosion of tourists on newly connected continental highways in the mid-century. But the older spaces that remain are ever more individual, and only relatively recently have had a resurgence of further awareness, developed through cult followings on websites like Atlas Obscura. Hopefully, there will always be someone interested in engaging with what local eccentrics express through their public works, as these sites are undeniably interesting and equally culturally valuable.

My approach to this project and the knowledge production it represents was established through my curatorial and editorial practice, founded on the premise of broadly sharing, academically and beyond, vernacular ideas and their artistic possibilities through printed dialogue and displayed images. This approach was pursued with a consistent sense of kinship felt towards the artist-curators and environments of concern, gained from my own rural background. Familiarity with the modest material resources available to rural vernacular artist-curators, and the self-taught innovation required thereof, provided insight into presenting the spaces of concern, and my subsequent dialogue with their artist-curators, in a manner that reduced the potential for this academic study to be exploitative or reductive of the vernacular artists' creative and theoretical capacities, as academic literature on these spaces often can be.

The product of my research, as produced and deposited in a metropolitan academic arts institution, is intended to, in its own small part, bridge a gap between the academic and the everyday audiences of the vernacular spaces of concern. The publication I created provides a

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[2] John Beardsley et al., *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project* (Painted Turtle, 2007).

model for reading vernacular spaces through their artist-curators' projects, goals, and ideas, emphasizing the unique value of the vernacular curatorial imagination. Conversely, my broad application of academic literature to the everyday contexts of vernacular sites is intended to bridge the gap between rural and otherwise everyday audiences and the theory afforded by said academic literature, which may otherwise be inaccessible.

The editorial format of my research was conceived of as an exhibition in print form, curating the otherwise quite site-specific vernacular curatorial space through photos, interview-based dialogue, provided context, and an account of the visiting experience gained through field research. This format is intended to allow a degree of accessible asynchronous access to the spaces in question as well as a broader appreciation in the reader for each site's unique character and affordances. This curated experience of the vernacular curatorial space is extended through the book's capacity to be reprinted and shared ad infinitum, designed partially after travel guides and partially after art historical surveys, for a broad, not necessarily academic, audience. The mode of dissemination for my research was further chosen for its capacity to be given back to the artists and curators that it features. In the chosen format, this project is poised for further exploration of the quite theoretically, thematically, and geographically broad vernacular curatorial imagination in accompanying editions.

Literature Review

My research exists at an intersection of the field of ethnography and folklore studies, interpreting the unique cultural expressions of rural and culturally distinct populations, and art and curatorial history/historiography, regarding the art historical background of the contemporary vernacular curatorial imagination. Museum studies speak to small-scale, single-

subject collections and displays of vernacular themes, as well as the representational deficits in institutional museums regarding the inclusion of outside voices.

Ethnography & Folklore Studies

Ethnography and folklore studies, often intersecting with museum studies, represent the majority of academic literature on the vernacular personal collections and public displays of my concern; however, in this literature, the vernacular curated site is predominantly discussed peripherally, as an extension of discussions of related curated environments. The primary concern of ethnographic and folkloric studies is rather on analyzing historical reenactment "pioneer/colonial villages" and regional folk festivals. These types of analyses can be found in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and the collected essays of *Folklife and Museums: Twenty-First Century Perspectives* edited by C. Kurt Dewhurst, Patricia Hall, and Charlie Seemann. This literature, although often engaging only tangentially with the specific concerns of my research, nonetheless provided useful contextual and cultural insights into the sites of my concern, as well as a further understanding of how these vernacular sites are understood, or at least have been understood historically.

Destination Culture, by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a cultural anthropologist and folklorist, is particularly relevant in introducing how the traditional system of the metropolitan, educational, collecting museum appropriates rural vernacular cultural forms and renders them foreign. Central to this is the transformation of the everyday object, deemed obsolescent in the contemporary urban context, into a heritage artifact. The museum exhibition, in turn, imbues a supposedly objective secondary meaning on these objects, revealing the political economy that underpins both museum practice and cultural tourism more broadly. Crucially, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

introduces what is described as the "tourist surreal,"[3] the contrasting foreignness of the object that is exhibited to its alien manner of exhibition. The vernacular curatorial imagination re-appropriates this surreal contrast by reclaiming the display of the artist-curator's everyday utilitarian objects, breaking this external appropriative cycle, and via the artist-curator's subjective associations, re-situating objects within their own, authentic, contexts of display.

Folklife and Museums, a collection of essays published by the American Association of Museums, collectively underscores the ephemerality of local culture and the precarious status of the objects through which local culture is expressed. When micromuseums and similar small-scale, self-organized sites remain both institutionally and publicly under-acknowledged, entire domains of cultural practice risk disappearing from broader cultural consciousness. Such omissions can reinforce the perception that regions outside major urban centers lack significant object-based histories worthy of preservation. Moreover, the agency of those individuals and communities who found and maintain their own museums is overlooked by dominant culture and thus stifled.

Art & Curatorial History/Historiography

Art and curatorial history and historiography applied to my broader application of aesthetic theory, sees the sites of concern as composite living artifacts whose various parts, in assemblage, then form a single work of art. The history of such works being, likewise, vernacularly built. My application of the actual term "vernacular" as a framing term for my research was a careful concession; the terms "folk" and "outsider" are other frequently used art historical references.[4] However, these terms reaffirm a determinedly exclusive canon that has

[3] *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 152.
[4] Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*. (Pantheon, 2000), 77-78.

been too loosely used to represent art by all untrained artists, particularly art by any demographic or individual disregarded as 'other.' While the term vernacular also poses problems, it is in many ways a substitute for prior terms without substantive change to the marginalization that those terms connote,[5] my use of "vernacular" is indebted to the definitions supplied by Lucy Lippard and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In *Mixed Blessings*, Lippard uses the term vernacular to imply a "made at home" quality through which people speak for themselves in a manner distanced from the predominant cultural constructions that constrain art to the binary of high and low. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in *Destination Culture*, likewise uses the term vernacular to represent the cultural and aesthetic richness of commonness, folk or rudimentary culture, and so-called 'bad taste,' or kitsch, and its connoisseurship. A connoisseurship of crucial 'low cultural' themes and concerns featured in rural vernacular micromuseums yet disregarded by metropolitan 'high cultural' institutional museums.

The artist-curators[6] who make up the sporadic roadmap of "vernacular curation" would not necessarily self-define as artist-curators nor likely choose the term vernacular; they are situated outside of the domain of the academic or market pressures. These individuals do, however, collect, display, and create bodies of work meant to communicate to an audience of passersby a sense of their everyday lived experiences and regional surroundings. Collectively, these artist-curators assemble installations compulsively, intuitively, and purely imaginatively– 'bodging'[7] works with accessible materials as folk, outsider, visionary, and vernacular artists are wont to do. What is called 'vernacular art' arises from a desire to make the everyday, laborious,

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[5]Grey Gundaker, "Becoming Art: Life Spans, Biographies, and the Shelp Collection." In *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South,* Arthur C. Danto. (Abrams Books, 2002), 44.

[6] An 'expanded field' of curating that frames curation as an artistic practice. Alison Green, *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium*. (Reaktion Books, 2018).

[7] British-English slang, to use the skill of improvisation to assemble together a functional, if not elegant, solution.

and mundane personal and meaningful; thus, vernacular curation has greater affordances in cultural and regional expression.

Literature by authorities of vernacular curation, and the history of folk art more broadly, as artistic endeavors, was invaluable. The authors of *Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project*, John Beardsley, Michael Hodges, Neal Shine, Daniel S. Hoops, Marilyn Wheaton, Marion E. Jackson, Aku Kadogo, and Jenenne Whitfield, are intimately involved in the project's construction, preservation, and legacy. The discussion of the Heidelberg Project provides an idea of a popular artist-built environment's public reception, continually challenged by government bodies and initially neglected by even regional cultural institutions, yet lauded by creatives of all classes who cared enough to get involved with the project. This history of the project also provides a model for local-creative preservation of built environments, given such official challenges. *Connecting the Dots* situates the Heidelberg Project as a model of local, creative intervention in the built environment. Emerging from found materials and an ethos of transformation, the project exemplifies how discarded objects can be reimagined into sites of aesthetic, social, and cultural significance.

It was argued by some critics of the Heidelberg Project that the project would be more appropriate or effective were it relocated to an institutional setting, although this would position it away from the founding contributors and local audience. This argument was made in large part due to the "undesirable" character, according to the regional government, of the neighbourhood in which the project resides. The authors of *Connecting the Dots* emphasize the project's capacity in the community; blurring boundaries between art and life, the project's immersive, multisensory qualities, and the eagerness of its contributors to foster dialogue across communities, including artists, locals, and academic audiences. The Heidelberg Project resists

institutional containment and reasserts the capacity of individuals and communities to creatively reconstruct meaning from conditions of neglect and marginalization. This reception and capacity demonstrate the power of vernacular artistic practices to challenge conventional definitions of curated space.

Literature on broader curatorial projects, such as "Becoming Art: Life Spans, Biographies, and the Shelp Collection" by Grey Gundaker, in *Testimony: Vernacular Art of the African-American South*, provides insight into the self-constructions and contrary public preconceptions of self-taught artists' cultural identity, as well as the tensions between these self-definitions and prevailing public assumptions. Within this framework, vernacular art is removed from its marginal standing within contemporary art discourse. *Testimony* argues for how vernacular artists challenge dominant narratives by compelling a reconsideration of how contemporary art is defined, discussed, and valued, particularly in relation to originality, authenticity, and cultural import. Vernacular practices disrupt restrictive culturally hegemonic frameworks, allowing room for alternative modes of thinking and interpretation that are otherwise increasingly rare within institutional discourse. *Testimony* further argues that although folk, or vernacular, artists are externally preconceived as 'low culture,' not being the most visible or commercially influential cultural producers, the intellectual rigor, independence, and clarity with which these artists forge their own paths suggest a form of wisdom that significantly enriches and expands the artistic canon.

These contextual and theoretical resources by primary authorities in vernacular curation were useful in building my perception of the circumstances surrounding the founders/stewards of vernacular sites. They invite thinking about the systems of establishment of large metropolitan collecting museums and formal galleries, and the contrast thereof in the establishment of the

vernacular space, defined by their being built by everyday people out of passionate compulsion rather than by entities compelled by institutional or commercial interests. These spaces of vernacular concern, without formal mission statements, privileged educational background, or a need for stakeholder approval, are built specifically for the expression of their artist-curators' under-acknowledged vernacular themes of concern, not limited by their lack of invitation, symbolically and literally, to the institutional museum or formal gallery.

Museum Studies

Museum studies were applicable in my approach to highly specialized "micromuseums." Candlin, a British researcher and Professor of Museology at the University of London, argues for micromuseums as a category. Often disparate from formal academic frameworks, these galleries, museums, and cultural repositories welcome visitors into intimate spaces where curators, typically community volunteers or independent founders, serve as informative visitor-facing guides, crafting personal and narrative-driven interpretations of densely arranged collections.

Candlin also provides a framework for interpreting these spaces with attention to the nuances of micromuseums.

> Instead of assuming that exhibitions are more-or-less discrete from the buildings they occupy, or from the surrounding landscape, I conceive of museums as assemblages wherein the neighbouring rivers, streets, shelving units, lighting systems, or proffered cups of tea may all be important elements both in how those places are experienced and what happens therein.[8]

After Candlin, the photos included in the bookwork, taken during my field research at the sites of my concern, are intended to give an impression of the surrounding environment and the subjectively experienced atmosphere of the sites.

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[8] Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 28.

Museum studies were also useful in providing further insight into the status of institutionally constricted curated spaces and their representational deficits in incorporating outside voices. In Bruno Brulon Soares' "Museums and Their Borders: Teaching and Learning from Experimental Museology,"[9] Soares presents a framework for experimental decolonial museology. Discerning itself from previous hegemonic frameworks within museums, where the rational is presented as superior and separate from the "raw," Soares argues for reclaiming the right to heritage and the practice of making museums in spontaneous and creative new ways. This way of curating was definitional to the selection of my vernacular sites of concern.

Similar in effect to Soares' model of experimental museology, in "Where Pop Meets Purl: Knitting, the Curation of Craft, and the Folk/Mass Culture Divide,"[10] Julie Wolfram Cox and Stella Minahan provide historical insight into curatorial legitimacy in and around museums through a critical examination of the contemporary curatorial inclusion in museums of craft and so-called low culture, such the allowance or lack thereof of knitted works. Cox and Minahan argue that such inclusions allow for a relaxation of the elitism of art consumption and make possible a more complicated appreciation of museums. Their argument also accounts for a framework in which we can appreciate curators as less-elitist critics of museums' hegemonic aesthetic boundaries, elucidating how folk traditions and everyday popular culture are mutually informative, and calling for greater attention to these intersections.

[9] In *Decolonising Museology: Decolonising the Curriculum,* vol. 3., International Committee for Museology, 2022.
[10] *Curator: The Museum Journal* 58 (3): 235–49.

Inspiring Precedents

The editorial construction and delivery of my research was inspired by a canon of literature and other art practices involved in the discourse surrounding folk art, micromuseums, artist-built environments, and roadside attractions. Besides Candlin's *Micromuseology*, an unlikely practice that is nevertheless closely related to my own research, was found in Erika Nelson's World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things (WLCo/WSVo/WLT), a traveling roadside attraction and museum. Nelson's work is rooted in travel, observation, and the documentation of vernacular environments, but culminates in a traveling micromuseum, housed in a bus, exhibiting Nelson's miniature recreations of roadside "world's largest" attractions encountered along her American travels. Through journeys across rural landscapes, Nelson engages with artist-built environments and idiosyncratic attractions, sharing the stories she finds embedded within specific places. Nelson underscores the importance of encountering these spaces in situ, through direct engagement with both the environment and its maker. Nelson also emphasizes critical self-reflection as the foundation of their practice; creative insight being provided by the reexamination of their childhood interactions with such attractions in an expanded context.

Also on View: Unique and Unexpected Museums of Greater Los Angeles was an influence that inspired my book's format. Written by Todd Lerew and featuring photographs by Ryan Schude, the book presents a selected survey of the more than 750 museums in the greater Los Angeles area, featuring 64 of LA's more under-acknowledged and eclectic micromuseums. In the production of *Also on View*, Lerew spoke to the museums' curators, many of whom are photographed along with their collections. In doing so, the book foregrounds the personal investment and narrative intent behind these idiosyncratic spaces. The included portraits and

dialogues emphasize the dignity and commitment of these individuals as custodians of meaning, highlighting the significance of their collections regardless of scale or preconceived economic or cultural value. Blending documentary and narrative approaches, the project captures the texture of local culture across community spaces, small businesses, and subcultures, offering a nuanced portrait of how museums can emerge from everyday acts of collecting, storytelling, and display.

The canon of travel guides and novelty books that record and disseminate knowledge of micromuseums, was also influential to the text-image design and the intended accessibility of audience chosen for my project. For example, *Offbeat Museums: The Collections and Curators of America's Most Unusual Museums* by Saul Rubin, is a book like many others in its genre with a broad audience grabbing promise, "Rubin takes you on a guided tour of the United States' strangest institutions, and introduces you to the offbeat people who run them," this literature nonetheless broadens knowledge of otherwise publicly under-acknowledged sites. Atlas Obscura continues the tradition of such works, claiming to be "the definitive guide to the world's hidden wonders, from ancient relics to roadside oddities, we connect you to the best of what's out there."[11] Atlas Obscura's endeavor to curate the user-and often site curator-submitted articles on vernacular attractions are done in a manner that records information and promotes awareness of vernacular sites to an audience of unprecedented size.

Roadside America: Architectural Relics from a Vanishing Past presents a survey of unknown and eclectic roadside attractions across the U.S., through a selection from architectural critic and photographer John Margolies' practice; photos that provide a beautifully surreal account of the individual atmosphere of roadside attractions. Spanning several decades,

[11] "Atlas Obscura." Accessed April 3, 2026. www.atlasobscura.com.

from the mid-century to the new millennium, Margolies' work documents roadside built environments defined by individual expression, before the rise of standardized architecture and branding. Motivated by a desire to preserve these ephemeral sites, Margolies called attention to, if not memorialized, a diverse range of vernacular structures and signage that might otherwise have disappeared, creating an archive of significant cultural value. His images reveal the surreal imaginative qualities of micromuseums, offbeat landmarks, and vernacular environments, underscoring these sites' capacity to reimagine everyday landscapes. Margolies' approach contributed to my foregrounding the surrounding environments in the coverage of my sites of concern.

The Painted House of Maud Lewis: Conserving a Folk Art Treasure by Hamilton, Laurie, Craig Dix, and Jennifer McLaughlin, featuring detailed photos provided directly after textual references, was relevant in seeing how the more institutional constructions of vernacular art history, and the promotion thereof, are produced. *The Painted House of Maud Lewis* outlines the institutionally lengthened lifespan of the house, or afterlife. In that the book documents, from the perspective of the staff of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS), how the Maud Lewis House was removed from the environment inherent to its construction and to its interpretation. The house, previously experienced via house calls by visitors engulfed in Maud Lewis' contexts, now in reconstruction is uniquely and permanently resituated into a major provincial art gallery; made available, for better or worse, to casual visitors of the AGNS's Scotiabank Maud Lewis Gallery. In comparison, *Charles Wm MacDonald: Seaman, Labourer, Artist, Manufacturer (1874–1967)* by Patrick Condon Laurette, consisting of a catalog and essay for a 1981 exhibition of Charles MacDonald's work, also at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, furnished a model for producing a succinct history of a vernacular artist in a temporary exhibition format, while leaving

MacDonald's primary artistic practice in situ. The book is, of course, particularly relevant given that the Charles MacDonald Concrete House was a site of interest.

Daniel Wojcik's *Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity* offers an illustrated examination of the complex and often contested field of outsider art, encompassing related categories such as art brut, visionary art, and folk art, grounded in direct dialogue with artists. Challenging the notion of outsider artists as isolated or purely idiosyncratic figures, Wojcik situates their work within the broader context of vernacular traditions, religious devotion, ethnic heritage, and popular culture. The study frames outsider art not as a marginal or anomalous practice, but as a vital site for understanding the broader dynamics of human expression, cultural identity, and the creative impulse.

The Folk Art Messenger, a triannual publication of the Folk Art Society of America, offers a sustained model, publishing since 1987, for editorial and interview-based engagement with self-taught artists and vernacular environments. Produced by a nonprofit organization, The Folk Art Messenger is free to members and is dedicated to the documentation, preservation, and exhibition of contemporary folk art. The publication plays a significant role in fostering visibility and dialogue within this field. As one of the few remaining English-language periodicals of its kind, it prioritizes artists' voices and careers, positioning them at the center of its coverage while connecting them to a broader network of collectors, scholars, and enthusiasts of folk art. Through its integration with conferences, site visits, and community programming, *The Folk Art Messenger* extends beyond print to cultivate direct encounters with artists and their work, underscoring the importance of ongoing, relational engagement in sustaining vernacular artistic practices.

Alex Busby's short documentary *Folk Art Found Me* (1993), and the *Visions of Paradise* short documentary series, produced & directed by Allie Light and Irving Saraf in the early 1980s, funded by the National Film Board of Canada and the American National Endowment for the Arts, respectively, are similar in their approaches and were equally inspirational. Both offer interview-based engagements with folk artist environments as well as providing coverage of their surrounding environments. *Visions of Paradise* features such diverse and preeminent American folk artists and environments as Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey's *Bottle Village*, John "Rolling Thunder" Pope's *Thunder Mountain House Monument*, and Calvin Black's *Possum Trot*. *Folk Art Found Me,* likewise, speaks with such influential Canadian folk artists as Sidney Howard, Wesley Hubley, Eddie Mandaggio, Garnet McPhail, and Harry Whitney. These films allow the artists to explain for themselves what real folk art is, providing a rare primary insight into mid-career vernacular, often environmental, artistic practices.

Methodologies

I approached sites of concern through critical self-reflection, field research, and interview-based dialogue with the representatives of spaces of concern. The editorial composition of my curated study of vernacular sites, myself serving as both editor and curator, was in large part inspired by Fiona Candlin's own coverage of various visited micromuseums, exploring different themes through the museum's unique affordances. This approach is detailed in the preface of Candlin's book, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums*.

> Given the difficulties of historical analysis or professional critique, I began by photographing and writing long descriptions of individual micromuseums, paying attention to their setting, accommodation, collections, and forms of display. I considered the landscapes in which they were situated, neighbouring buildings, entrance halls,

> lighting, signage, and the museum cases as well as the objects on exhibition and the way in which they were arranged. In doing this work it also became clear that I also needed to examine a further topic, that of the staff and of my interactions with them.[12]

Field Research & Interview-Based Dialogue

My interactions with representatives onsite were necessarily limited, not having yet been approved by the REB for research with human participants nor having fully formed pointed research questions at the time of visiting my spaces of interest, but the natural interactions with those authorities made available at the spaces of interest, as a visitor during normal operating hours, were informative and noted. Candlin's approach in the framing of their book around several specific sites was also an inspiration in my reaching out to my several distinct spaces of interest, on which I focus sections, to gain further insight and develop further dialogue, as if in person, into their artist-curators' unique self-perceptions.

Approaching direct dialogue as a research methodology allowed my intended knowledge production to be a collaborative and relational process, emerging through exchanges with artist-curators and stewards of the sites under study. While initial interactions occurred informally during site visits, my project extends these encounters through ongoing correspondences and the structuring of interviews within the publication itself. This approach is informed by precedents such as *The Folk Art Messenger*, which prioritizes artists' voices and sustains dialogue through editorial practice, as well as *Also on View*, where curators are represented alongside their collections, emphasizing their interpretive agency.

Additionally, the multi-authored perspectives in *Connecting the Dots* demonstrate how meaning is collectively constructed through diverse viewpoints, including those of artists,

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[12] Fiona Candlin, *Micromuseology: An Analysis of Small Independent Museums* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 22.

community members, and scholars. In adopting a format focused on direct embodied experiences, my research resists extractive models of documentation, instead positioning the vernacular curatorial imagination, in publication, as an ongoing site of exchange, one that invites continued response from participants and readers alike. Through this choice, interpretation remains open-ended, shaped by multiple voices, and reflective of the inherently conversational nature of vernacular curatorial practice.

Critical Self Reflection

Self-reflection was an initial inspiration for my research and the basis for the intimate position on which I founded my research. I first encountered vernacular curation growing up in southeastern Ohio in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Sunday drives with my father, which would take us along winding, wooded roads, often beside derelict railroad tracks, and into neighbouring towns and villages strung along the broad and winding Ohio River, were a fact of life. Country roads like these are often marked with hand-painted signs for captivating, unique, inexplicable museums and art environments. In a rural area that often felt like an entertainment desert, curiously stopping in to while away the afternoon in these spaces was always captivating; it felt like a discovery.

As a kid, I spent more time in these independent spaces than I ever did in more formally acknowledged art galleries and museums, the nearest of which were two to four hours, or more, from where we lived. Reflecting on the enduring impact these vernacular sites have had on me and the kinship and natural rapport I still feel when entering rural vernacular spaces and speaking with their custodians, I approached the sites of concern on my research road trip in much the same way I approached roadside sites in my formative years. Coming to sites on casual visits and

taking the time for fruitful conversations. A priority in producing my research was to reflect on and record immediate subjective impressions of the spaces and their surroundings, as well as foster dialogue with the spaces' stewards in a manner that minimized the limitations of my being divorced from the nuances of their local contexts. In the interview-based dialogue I present, an intention was to convey the stewards' hospitality and openness and further emphasize the artist-curators' own creative intents and unique voices.

Critical self-reflection as a research methodology also provided a platform to acknowledge how perception is shaped by memory and travel. In this sense, my research aligns with the travel-based, observational strategies outlined in Fiona Candlin's *Micromuseology*, particularly her attention to atmosphere, spatial context, and the embodied experience of visiting small-scale museums. Similarly, Erika Nelson's traveling roadside attraction and museum practice, WLCo/WSVo/WLT,[13] built around revisiting vernacular environments through travel and personal narrative, reinforces the value of subjective, site-based inquiry.

By documenting immediate impressions through photography and descriptive writing, my research's self-reflective model resists objectivity and instead foregrounds the situated, interpretive nature of the research encounter. The resulting analysis reflects a continuous negotiation between past and present experiences, allowing the vernacular curatorial imagination to be understood as both personally resonant and contextually embedded.

[13] Nelson, Erika. 2001. "Driving Around Looking at Big Things While Thinking About Spam." MA Thesis, University of Kansas. http://www.worldslargestthings.com/thesis.htm.

Editorial & Curatorial Approach

The vernacular curatorial imagination is a model that is itself radical in its creation of composite living artifacts whose various parts, in assemblage, form a single curatorial work, as a component of perhaps a broader artistic practice.[14] This in itself was an inspiration in my attempt at representing these spaces in published form. The editorial composition of my curated study of vernacular sites treats the book itself as an immersive medium. Through the sequencing of pages, the juxtaposition of image and text, and the material tactility of size, weight, and texture, the book creates a private space that nonetheless communicates the public character of the sites it engages with. The relationship between reader and author, and the documented exchanges between myself and the artist-curators with whom I am in dialogue, are intended to draw the reader both into these spaces and into dialogue. This approach was inspired by Walter Benjamin's writings on the affordances of mechanical reproduction, via Stephen Bury's interpretation focused on the 'art book.'[15]

To position all artist-curators on equal footing, the interviews are presented without hierarchy or disciplinary grouping, ordered solely according to the sequence in which I visited each site. Each section underwent multiple iterations, supported by extensive research and careful photo editing, resulting in a close and deliberate integration of text and image. The cover, an obfuscated collage of pamphlets given by the sites I visited amidst research, establishes the raw and unpolished visual tone of the vernacular curatorial imagination.

The curated engagement with vernacular curatorial spaces that my book presents is

[14] Elena Filipovic. 2017. *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*.
[15] Stephen Bury, 2019. "The Artist's Book in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Walter Benjamin and the Artist's Book." in *Arts*. 8 (4). 138.

extended through its potential for continual reproduction and circulation. Drawing in part on the conventions of travel guides and art historical surveys, it is designed to reach a broad audience beyond academic contexts. This format also allows the book to be gifted to the artist-curators it features, fostering an ongoing, reciprocal dialogue. In this form, the project remains open-ended, positioned to support further exploration of the expansive and still largely academically and publicly underexamined field of the vernacular curatorial imagination in future editions.

Conclusions & Future Research

The vernacular curatorial space is not a blank canvas or framed fine art, but a palimpsest, a product of all a space's or artist-curator's previous associations. Recycled materials, rough textural walls, and echoes of previous utilitarian incarnations contextually frame new work. The space becomes a living archive of everything previously written, not treated reverently, but approached with an unconstrained appetite for further imaginative expression and dialogue. In this way, vernacular curation has greater affordances in cultural and regional expression. Artist-curators collect, display, and create bodies of work meant to communicate to an audience of both locals and passersby a sense of their everyday lived experiences. Collections and environments are made fully visible and tactile to visitors, and a narrative is formed through the overlap of objects and themes, made anew through assemblage.

To return to my spaces of interest, the Museum of Everyday Life exhibits the stain, dust, and the safety pin; and likewise, the Hanson Sculpture Garden displays animals, local and exotic, but also extinct and imaginary. Both spaces present eclectic narratives not tied down to any expected associations– they freely associate. Through this allowance, the vernacular curatorial imagination presents new ways of thinking. It provides a space where goofy Yoda

representations, toothbrushes, Bigfoot statues, matches, chainsaw-carved bridge trolls, and personal hygiene can all be explored to the fullest extent of what they may afford. The artifact or object, commonplace or rare - and its approximation or simulacrum, is no longer treated as sacred, but as the subject of playful interpretation.

The vernacular artifact, object, or theme might be transfigured into an evocative assemblage that both brings attention back to the object, in its most basic form, and sparks the imagination in order to think of the object or theme in a new way. There might be an exhibition on pencils featuring an archway made from them,[16] or a display on deadly human diseases as horror movie monsters.[17] As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a preeminent voice in performance and folklore scholarship, states while arguing for how the commonplace is often conflated with bad taste, "the curating of kitsch [the vernacular] has become the supreme act of connoisseurship. The problem is no longer bad taste but good, which is conservative, boring, acquiescent."[18] The vernacular curatorial imagination, although niche, affords an exciting freedom of cultural expression, inspired by rural traditions yet anachronistic, exhibiting art but unconstrained by dominant logics, taking time but not requiring any formal compensation, valuable yet not intimidatingly surveilled, open to accessible exploration and interpretation.

My research is disseminated through an invented publication on vernacular curation, creating a space for the display of vernacular art and for critical discussion around it. By

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[16] A piece made in part for *Draw the Line and Make Your Point: The Pencil and the 21st Century.* An exhibition that offered unique ways of looking at the Pencil, including unlikely objects made from pencils. Curated by Clare Dolan at the Museum of Everyday Life. Ran from June 2013 to May 2014. The pencil arch is now on permanent display.

[17] A display at the Hanson Sculpture Garden dedicated to pandemics and to New Brunswick health care professionals. AIDS is represented by a *Scream* (1996) slasher, COVID-19 is represented by Nosferatu, and America's Indigenous Diseases are represented by Bigfoot, among other pandemics and famous villains. The sculptures are accompanied by death statistics and other didactics.

[18] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Disputing Taste." In *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Univ of California Press, 1998), 276.

developing an editorial form that is itself vernacular in its logic, structure, and circulation, rather than conforming to institutional modes of curation or academic standardization, this book adopts an intuitive, travel-based, image-text assemblage construction that mirrors the practices it documents: iterative, site-responsive, and shaped by personal encounters and lived experience. My research in publication is intended to translate spatial, immersive environments into a portable yet materially attentive format, preserving their atmosphere while allowing for broader access. This approach establishes an alternative to prevailing academic, museological, and commercial frameworks, which often abstract, sanitize, or recontextualize such practices within otherwise institutionally imposed, misguided, and inaccurate cultural narratives. Instead, this publication maintains the specificity, contingency, and subjectivity of vernacular sites, foregrounding the voices and intentions of their creators.

The Vernacular Curatorial Imagination is created with the hope of opening a space for the presentation and dissemination of vernacular curatorial practices on their own terms, extending their reach without subsuming them into dominant institutional logics. It stages a form of critical engagement that is formed through dialogue, is accessible and ongoing, and invites readers, artists, and communities into a shared process of interpretation. In this way, the project documents an under recognized field, as well as actively participating in its expansion. It positions vernacular curation as a vital and generative mode of cultural production that challenges, complicates, and ultimately enriches contemporary understandings of art, exhibition, and authorship.

Unbounded in its scope, the vernacular curatorial imagination is broad geographically, theoretically, and thematically. An intention of the editorial format is its capacity for continuation in further volumes, either through road-trips that present different geographically

contained surveys, or through more geographically broad studies on a single curated theoretical or thematic basis. A volume, for example, could focus on micromuseums of obsolete technologies. Museums of tube televisions, radios, vehicles of all kinds -and even domestic electric fans - are abundant. A volume, likewise, could be dedicated to the American South, particularly along U.S. Route 66, where artist-built environments are liberally scattered. A volume, or many, could be simply dedicated to the study of sites, both new and old, that are almost completely unknown; a volume could emphasize wearable exhibitions as everyday performances, or something as seemingly simple as seashells in assemblage. The vernacular curatorial imagination is an open-ended category of artistic practice, with only quite specific sections academically or publicly explored, and many facets left to be discovered in future volumes.

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