

SOURCED: LOCAL ARTISTS AND COMMUNITIES INFLUENCE EACH OTHER

by Kelly Johnson, CP '15

The 2015 Curatorial Practice Master of Fine Arts (CP '15) at MICA emphasizes curating as a process of inquiry and understanding. The curator cycles through periods of discussion, action, reflection, and re-action in the development of an exhibition, particularly one that involves a community. Director-at-Large at Independent Curators International (ICI) Kate Fowle describes this responsive role of the curator as “mediator, facilitator, and middleman”¹ between artist, audience, and exhibition space. CP’s Practicum course is a year-long collaborative project designed for CP students and partnering artists to develop relationships with diverse audiences in Station North, ultimately creating an exhibition of community-engaged art. Networks of individuals from Station North—including five artists from the neighborhood; their friends, coworkers, neighbors, and patrons; and other constituents of the Station North community—were prompted to come together for this exhibition in order to participate and share ideas about the relationship between this specific community and art.

Past CP classes have commissioned artists to create site-specific works for Station North businesses (*Invited*, 2012) and established artist residencies in local houses of worship (*Congregate*, 2013). This year, *LOCALLY SOURCED* continues the tradition of curating community-engaged exhibitions by examining how specific artists draw inspiration from and contribute to their respective social groups while living and/or working within Station North. The exhibition asserts that artists as individuals exchange ideas and resources with their networks of neighbors, patrons, and friends, resulting in artwork that reflects the community in some form.

Writing in *Every Curator’s Handbook*, Sculpture-Center’s Ruba Katrib advises the attentive contemporary curator to “reach into various areas in one’s community and pull out the content that is already there,”² in order to develop an exhibition that is meaningful to an intended audience. To find artists who were already reflecting on the ways they interact with Station North communi-

ties in their artwork, the ten curators of CP class of 2015 (CP '15) reached out to networks of people active in the neighborhood. This included talking with Station North community leaders, participants in past Practicum projects, and the Practicum Advisory Committee, consisting of Station North residents, arts professionals, CP faculty, and staff members from MICA’s Office of Community Engagement. These networks led to five artists, each from a different Station North social network or circle: sculptor **Paula Whaley**, muralist **NETHER**, painter/sculptor **Jason Hoylman**, radio producer **Aaron Henkin**, and musician **Wendel Patrick**.

While the featured artists in this exhibition are *sourced locally* from Station North, the artists also *locally source* the content of their work directly from their environments, relationships, and experiences within this shared area. Through new work commissioned for the exhibition, the artists examine the extent to which their practices are community-oriented. The final results reflect a community influence on many levels—from conceptual inspiration to hands-on participation in the featured works.

Viewed together in the exhibition, the artists’ works reach out to and cross-pollinate many of Station North’s social groups, as each artist’s practice requires audience participation and input. Whaley invites the neighborhood into her studio space to participate in sculpture workshops. During these events, she exchanges art-making techniques with participants, while also gathering momentum and inspiration from her neighbors for the creation of new sculptural figures. NETHER engages in conversations with his neighbors before installing his murals in the community, often including stylized portraits of them in the compositions, providing a public presence for his community members. Working at the Windup Space, Hoylman interacts with various creative communities in Station North on a daily basis, facilitating shows and other events. For the exhibition, he examines how members of his network interact with shared space in the neighborhood by mapping their paths.

Henkin and Patrick photograph and interview participants involved in the *LOCALLY SOURCED* community, visiting the interviewees in their own spaces and creating interconnected profiles of the artists and influential members of their networks.

Grant Kester (MICA '86), author of *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, notes that the modernist vision of “the radically autonomous figure of the individual artist” isolated in the studio alludes to a traditionalist model, while the “dramatic growth of interest in collaborative, collective, and socially engaged practices,” especially in the past decade, signals a “shift in the nature of contemporary art practice at the level of form and methodology.”³ Kester elaborates that a contemporary, socially-minded practice offers “a very different image of the artist, one defined in terms of openness, of listening, and of willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator.”⁴ This image of the artist working with a group of people as collaborators, “whose knowledge and experience are essential to the work’s content and development,”⁵ reflects the practices of each artist in *LOCALLY SOURCED* as well as

and social engagement. Further, the artwork that results from their collaborations with the community demonstrates how the artist establishes perspectives for reflection within her or his neighborhood.

Whaley’s contemplative sculptural figures with contented eyes closed in reflection and outstretched flowing limbs are interspaced throughout her studio and invite the viewer to be introspective, providing a calm, meditative environment for a neighborhood retreat. NETHER’s larger-than-life, spirited public portraits of his neighbors show respect for the legacies and homes of longtime Station North community members. Hoylman’s minimalist, algorithmically arranged tracings of his networks’ winding paths observe a community’s overlapping use of space, highlighting this neighborhood as the central transit area of Baltimore which unifies many residents. Henkin’s and Patrick’s collaged visual and audio documentation preserves a sample of this community of artists and their social networks in Station North at a specific time in its evolution. Moving through the exhibition allows the viewer a glimpse into the different social circles each artist inhabits at this moment, mediated by her or his particular aesthetic lens.

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a wider trend in contemporary art practices today.

Texts and exhibitions influential to *LOCALLY SOURCED*, including projects featured in Kester’s scholarship in *Conversation Pieces*, along with those in Nato Thompson’s *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991 to 2011* (MIT Press, 2012), often focus on community-engaged or social practice artists who use art as an activist tool for sparking dialogue around certain social issues affecting a community. *LOCALLY SOURCED* continues to expand notions of how community-engaged art can function, what community-engaged practices can look like, and why this type of art is relevant to the field of curating now. While these artists did not necessarily see themselves as community-engaged prior to participating in this project, they all now acknowledge that the ways in which they work in their own neighborhoods add to a larger dialogue about art

While agency is given to the artists in this exhibition to reflect on their relationships with their community, none of these artists are the final experts on their neighborhoods or on the appropriate role of artists within them. CP '15 designed the exhibition to reveal this continually developing relationship between artist and audience by reflecting both voices in the final artworks and related texts. Further, an interactive wall in the exhibition’s design directly asks viewers to reflect on their own individual connections to Station North and the art they experience in the galleries. Accompanying programs include sculpture workshops with Whaley that preceded the exhibition; a collaborative performance in which a local dance company interacts with Hoylman’s final artwork; and a public artist lecture on North Avenue with NETHER. All of these elements were designed by the curators to allow for further exchange of resources and creative ideas between the community audience and artists.

Writing on the nature of curating in *Artforum*, Tenta Konsthall director Maria Lind asserts, “rather than being a product of [solely] the curator’s labor per se, curating is the result of a network of agents’ labor.”⁶ Just as the community-engaged artist relies on relationships with others to create their work, the curator acts in concert with many people, objects, and spaces to create an exhibition. Organizing these types of exhibitions allows curators to further reflect on the extent to which their own practices are socially engaged, as curators rely on communities—networks of artists and audiences—to source and experience their work as well. *LOCALLY SOURCED* provides an overall framework for examining these infinitely interlaced social dynamics, reflected specifically by the products of contemporary community-engaged artists of this moment in central Baltimore. Station North communities can bring more artists working in many different mediums and practices to the forefront of the neighborhood, sparking a continued dialogue about potential roles for creative individuals in their communities.

Artist and community members gather with the creators for a BBQ to discuss the exhibition. Photograph by Chris Beer.



¹Fowle, Kate. “Who cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today.” In *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*. (New York: apexart, 2007), 16.

²Katrib, Ruba. “Make Your Audience.” In *Every Curator’s Handbook* (Perfect Art Institution, 2012), 37.

³Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. (Oakland: University of California, 2013), 110, xxviii.

⁴Ibid, 110.

⁵Ibid, xvii.

⁶Lind, Maria. “The Curatorial,” *Artforum*, October 2009, 65, quoted in Terry Smith. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 50.