

# SEVEN DAYS

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## 'Action' Steps

Eyewitness: "The Art of Action"

By Kevin J. Kelley [12.02.09]

["The Art of Action"](#) [1] may be the most expensive, elaborate and bureaucratically involved show ever mounted in Vermont. Divided into three exhibits, it consists of 105 commissioned works by 10 artists. Its theme: the future of Vermont. Philanthropist [Lyman Orton](#) [2], owner of the [Vermont Country Store](#) [3], is covering its \$400,000 cost. [The Vermont Arts Council](#) [4] is coordinating its 10-month statewide tour — which started in southern Vermont and has worked its way north — with conceptual input from the [Vermont Council on Rural Development](#) [5]. The biggest chunk of "The Art of Action" landed at [Burlington International Airport](#) [6] for a six-week stay starting December 1. Most of the previous stops have been just two weeks long.

The VAC recently addressed some of the initial confusion about the complex scheduling of a show divided into "Artists' Choice" and two "Curator's Choice" segments. A comprehensible itinerary can now be accessed via a series of clicks at [www.vermontartscouncil.org](http://www.vermontartscouncil.org) [7].

The organizers' populist insistence on siting the main event in unconventional venues may limit the audience for this extravaganza. In particular, will Vermonters who aren't flying somewhere during the holidays make a point of visiting the airport to see an art show? And will those who are boarding flights budget the time to peruse 50-plus paintings?

The idea for the project grew from Orton's private collection of art created by Vermonters from the 1920s to the '50s. "All those artists are dead, so I got to thinking about how to get living artists to make works that would bring issues about the state's future alive to the eye," Orton recounts. "We're also trying to create a market and promote Vermont as a place where there's opportunity in the arts. We're kicking all this off by paying artists to do it."

Orton's concept, refined over two years with arts council director [Alex Aldrich](#) [8], draws on a survey conducted by the VCRD. It canvassed some 4000 Vermonters in an attempt to identify "core values and common priorities above and beyond politics," director Paul Costello explains. Concerns and hopes expressed for the state's future were compiled into a report, "Imagining Vermont," that was made available to the 300 artists from 26 states and four countries who responded to the call for submissions to "The Art of Action."

That large pool was winnowed by a review committee that then forwarded 80 artists' proposals to a panel of jurors. After choosing and interviewing 19 finalists, the jurors thrashed out a consensus on which artists would be part of what Orton calls the "Green Mountain 10."

Imagining and executing pieces in accordance with a predetermined theme was "completely against the way of working for some artists," says [Philip Godenschwager](#) [9], one of the chosen 10. "A lot of people

had a lot of difficulty with that.”

Still, he managed to create several satirical paintings and a humorous relief map of Vermont-as-theme-park inspired by comments in the VCRD's report. “Many people said they didn't want Vermont to become another Disneyland,” Godenschwager noted during a talk last month in Montpelier.

Orton awarded the chosen 10 a total of \$250,000 and gave them six months to complete as many works as they wished. However, the money wasn't parceled out evenly; some artists got as little as \$10,000 and some as much as \$40,000, depending on “the quality and quantity of what they ended up producing,” Orton says.

The artists also will get 10 percent of the prices their pieces fetch at an auction next July at Burlington's Union Station. The rest of the proceeds will be reserved for shows that Orton and the VAC intend to stage in coming years.

“I'm not an art dealer,” Orton says. “I'm not making any money on this.” He plans to compete for the works on auction with other bidders — meaning he will, essentially, pay twice for whatever he buys.

In Aldrich's view, that's as it should be. Early in the planning of “The Art of Action,” he recalls, “I said, ‘Listen, Lyman, if this is going to be an opportunity for you to commission works that go into your personal collection, we're not going to do it.’ To our gratitude and amazement and relief,” Aldrich continues, “Lyman said, ‘I understand. I'll be bidding along with everyone else.’”

Public presentation of “The Art of Action” wasn't so simple. Sponsors had assumed the artists would complete about half as many pieces as were actually produced. The output proved too large for most traditional venues, so the show was divided into the “Artists' Choice” and “Curator's Choice” segments. The latter portion was itself subsequently halved to accommodate display limitations and make the artworks accessible to viewers all over the state.

Artist [Janet Van Fleet](#) [10], a founder of [Studio Place Arts](#) [11] in Barre, was called in as a consultant to devise ways of exhibiting the “Curator's Choice” selections. “It's kind of funny to call me a curator,” she remarks, “because curators choose what will be in shows. The work was already selected in this case.”

Aldrich and Orton have sought to make a virtue of their inability to book most of the works into “standard” art venues, where exhibitions commonly are scheduled a year or two in advance. “We wanted to get the work out to as many people as quickly as possible,” Aldrich says.

The 52-piece “Artists' Choice” segment debuted in September at a car dealership in Manchester. It has also been displayed in vacant storefronts. And project director John Zwick argues that the very “incongruity” of the Burlington airport as an art space makes it a clever choice. “We wanted to make [“The Art of Action”] available to people not habituated to going to galleries and museums,” he says. “We wanted to encourage a whole new audience.”

While acknowledging that some find the venue choices odd or inconvenient, Aldrich says he has “no qualms, no regrets.” In fact, he and Orton take an anti-elitist position that verges on philistinism.

“Does it meet the current art guidelines for showing work? I couldn't care less about that,” Orton declares. And Aldrich adds, “We're not going to traditional, hoity-toity galleries where everything is perfectly lit and nicely set off.”

The main aim, Aldrich says, is to spark “civic discourse” by giving Vermonters “a chance to have discussions around issues that really matter.” The project is also “helping us conceive new ways of supporting artists in Vermont” that will influence initiatives the arts council launches in coming years,

Aldrich suggests.

Regardless of the unorthodox approach, Vermonters appear to be responding. About 800 visitors reportedly showed up during the two weeks “The Art of Action” was hung in an empty storefront on Main Street in Montpelier, and 80 attended its November 17 opening at the [Richmond Free Library](#) [12], according to publicist Erik Filkorn.

The paintings themselves do warrant attention. They come in a variety of styles and encompass a range of subjects — although nearly every one is representational, and some have no discernible relevance to the show’s theme. Aldrich’s observation at a public forum in Montpelier — that it’s “a much more gentle exhibit than I expected” — is borne out by the mainly middle-aged artists’ general adherence to landscape and portrait traditions. Few pieces in “The Art of Action” challenge aesthetic conventions.

The organizers will try for an edgier experience next time around, Orton says. “We’ll look to make space for up-and-coming artists who will take more risks and have a finger-in-your-eye attitude,” he promises.

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**Source URL:** <http://www.7dvt.com/action-steps>

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