



August 17, 2008

Shaping the future through art

*By Sally Pollak
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Lyman Orton was putting together a 2006 art exhibition from his private collection, "Lost Vermont Images," when the work inspired him to look in another direction: Not back at the way Vermont was -- but forward to what it might be.

A lifelong Vermonter whose family started the Vermont Country Store in Weston, Orton found himself wondering what artists would say about Vermont if they considered its future.

"I started to think about the role that art should play or could play in the process of planning a community," Orton, 66, said. "I thought that artists with their eye, with their ear, with their frame of mind, could perhaps provoke or prod discussion or bring forth debate as we look to the future of our community or state."

Working with the Vermont Arts Council and the Center for Rural Development, Orton developed an initiative that will commission artists to create works connected to the future of Vermont.

"The Art of Action: Shaping Vermont's Future Through Art" will offer commissions to 10 artists, each of whom will create a body of work that addresses issues of importance to Vermont's future.

This collaborative venture is funded by Orton, owner and proprietor of the Vermont Country Store. The money is not from his foundation, the Orton Family Foundation. The purpose of the project, however, is consistent with the foundation's interest in civic engagement and seeking ways to identify and articulate the "heart and soul" of community.

Commissions will range from \$10,000 to \$40,000, with the average commission \$25,000, according to the Arts Council. In addition, 20 finalists (before the last 10 are selected), will receive \$2,500 apiece to develop their proposals.

The Arts Council is serving as the administrator for "Art of Action," including convening a panel that will select the artists. (Application deadline is Aug. 28; go to www.vermontartscouncil.org)

The Vermont Council on Rural Development, through its program called Council on the Future of Vermont, will share with the selected artists the information it is gathering from Vermonters about issues that concern them.

Together, these three entities hope to generate artwork that will illuminate, provoke and respond to -- or perhaps help shape -- a picture of Vermont's future.

Perhaps visual presentations will inspire Vermonters to think about, and act on, issues such as development, transportation and the economic ramifications of second-home ownership, Orton said. "Land-use planning doesn't engage a lot of people until the bulldozers are at the gate," he said.

Orton hopes, also, that the project will help develop a market for what he calls cultural commentary art.

"I hope this will demonstrate that there's not only social and cultural value to it, but also market value," he said. "More people will want to put this kind of art over the fireplace, serious collectors from around the country."

Jonathan Gregg, an architect and founder of the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, an artists and writers' retreat, said there's a long and important history of artwork that has significant political impact. He cited as examples Goya's "Disasters of War" and "Guernica" by Picasso.

He noted, also, that a prominent artist whose work is imbued with a social and political vision, as well as the artist's creative one, lives and works in Vermont: Peter Schumann, founder of Bread and Puppet Theater in Glover.

"We have right here a role model for the interface of creative work and political and social comment," Gregg said.

"It is definitely the case that art can make a searing statement," he went on. "I think this is a very inspired and admirable project. The challenge for the Art of Action program, that I see, will be how these works will be brought to the attention of the people of Vermont and its legislators."

Organizers have a year to figure that out: The timetable calls for the artists, who will be selected by the end of the year, to create their pieces by September 2009.

John Zwick, project director for the Arts Council, said it's unclear how and where the works will be presented. "It's something we've thought about in the broadest strokes," he said. It will depend, in part, on the form of the pieces and their number.

"It will all reveal itself when it's supposed to," Zwick said. The exhibition of the pieces will include an online display, he said. Orton said one possibility is an auction of the works; he would keep one piece by each artist as funder of the project.

With the application deadline less than two weeks away, the council has received about 25 applications, Zwick said. Of these, two-thirds are from artists who live out of state. Zwick said he'd be pleased with 60 or 70 applications and "absolutely delighted" if the council received 100.

"This project is a really great, tremendous opportunity for artists in general, but especially for Vermont artists," Zwick said. "Because who knows Vermont better than the folks who have been living here and working here?"

Alex Aldrich, executive director of the Vermont Arts Council, sees the project as a "new way of looking at the intersection of art and community." He said he's looking forward to the results -- and is hopeful the pieces will have the power to influence people when they imagine art made in Vermont.

"One of the things I want to see is for the Vermont brand to finally include art and culture that is forward-thinking, progressive, not afraid to take on issues," Aldrich said. "To be something more than the safe landscape and still life work that one traditionally thinks of when one thinks of Vermont and art in the same sentence."

Contact Sally Pollak at spollak@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com or 660-1859. Art of Action timeline

Application deadline: Aug. 28

Panel selects 20 finalists: Sept. 30

Finalists make presentations to panel members at public meeting: January 2009

Ten finalists are selected: Within a week of the January presentations

Artists complete their commissions: September 2009

-- Source: Vermont Arts Council Panelists

The panel chosen to select the artists includes:

Margaret Kannenstine, artist from Woodstock

Warren Kimble, artist from Brandon

Melinda Moulton of Huntington, businesswoman and developer

Mary Hegarty Nowlan, editor Vermont Life magazine

George Pearlman, executive director of Vermont Studio Center

William Schubart of Hinesburg, founder/chairman of Resolution, Inc., longtime involvement in Vermont arts community

Marilyn Skoglund, associate justice of the Vermont Supreme Court

-- Source: John Zwick, Art of Action project director at Vermont Arts Council "Why Political Art"

Peter Schumann, founder Bread and Puppet Theater, offers his thoughts on political art:

Cultural capitalism has many arts to promote free-doom and demo-crazy, and the doom continuously deepens and the craze is predictable.

The big design of capitalism subordinates the existing philosophies and arts in order to get spiritual cement for its freedom-of-choice walls and prisons.

But the sourdough rises and philosophers and artists alike ferment as fast as the stink of capitalism's dirty socks grows.

Possibilitarians emerge from all walks of life and apply their jolly trickery not only to subvert this pretty civilization of ours. They offer classes in end-of-hell-beginning-of-paradise practices. Possibilitarian musicians dumpster-dive for any discarded divine chords; possibilitarian sculptors bicycle all the way to Michelangelo; possibilitarian dancers plant successful potatoes as part of their curriculum.

The sun it rises in the day and in the evening slips away.
