Roadside Attractions: Politics, Tourism, and Folk Culture in Roadside America

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The placement of art on the roadside characterizes a unique, vernacular expression of political messaging that is unfiltered and passionate. This art curates a specific audience because of its roadside position, as it is designed to accumulate attention from large audiences that happen to be driving by—often tourists. Roadside expression allows people from a variety of backgrounds to come to a mutual awareness or understanding through an artistic medium. This paper seeks to explore roadside folk art as a demonstration of individual American political protest, an outlet for human creativity, a site of tourism, and as a connection to landscape. By exploring Lakenenland by Tom Lakenen as a specific case study, as well as larger contexts of tourism and museums, I will demonstrate the strength and importance of roadside folk art in America.

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I'd most importantly like to thank Tom Lakenen, for taking the time and energy to speak with me about his art.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

Chapter 1

Introduction: Lakenenland by Tom Lakenen

Introduction

Roadside art attracts a specific audience because of its spatial placement, as it is designed to accumulate attention from large audiences that happen to be driving by—often tourists. Roadside expression allows people from a variety of backgrounds to come to a mutual awareness or understanding through an artistic medium. This thesis seeks to explore roadside folk art as a demonstration of individual American political protest, an outlet for human creativity, a site of tourism, and as a connection to landscape. The placement of art on the roadside characterizes a unique, vernacular expression of political messaging that is unfiltered and passionate. By exploring Lakenenland by Tom Lakenen as a specific case study, as well as larger contexts of tourism and museums, I will demonstrate the strength and importance of roadside folk art in America.

This thesis responds to the questions: How do some roadside attractions express the political opinions of their creator? Are some roadside attractions folk art and their makers folk artists who represent their political opinions through art? Does tourism affect the perception of folk art in America? Do tourists view political folk art differently than they view apolitical folk art? How do museums interfere or support an artist's wishes? How do museums disrupt the original contexts of folk artists and how might this be avoided?

To answer these questions, I will begin by exploring the different artistic works by Tom Lakenen at Lakenenland, as well as the cultural, political, and regional contexts that are related;

Chapter 1 will focus on Lakenenland as a place. Chapter 2 will then discuss the touristic aspects of Lakenenland, the sociology of tourism related to Lakenenland, and how these concepts relate to other folk art-environments in America. In Chapter 3, I will discuss how museums can affect (and disrupt) the perception, ethics, context, and spatial positioning of folk art-environments. These chapters will use Lakenenland as a case study to demonstrate how folk art-environments are conceptually situated in the United States. The fields of folklore, art, art history, tourism, and sociology often consider the individual components of a folk-art environment and roadside attraction, but seldom are all these concepts defined and explored together. In my conclusion I will address how my findings relate to each research question and consider the larger implications for present and future scholarly work.

Methods

In order to complete my work, I completed a number of interviews and field visits, as well as a review of relevant literature. It started out with a winter visit to Lakenenland in December of 2023. I was not planning to study Lakenenland at that time, and only was scoping out some local roadside attractions near my mom's house in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I visited the site and took some pictures but became increasingly interested in the political components of the art, and what that could mean for visitor's perceptions of the site. I then pivoted my research to study Tom's art specifically. I completed literature reviews on roadside attractions, and history and sociology of American tourism, artist-built environments, roadside architecture, and museum ethics.

After obtaining an IRB (Institution Review Board) exemption from the University of Oregon, I completed a second, more in-depth field site visit in July 2024. Here, I walked around

the property, looking at every piece, and photographing extensively. I interviewed Tom Lakenen in-person under his picnic pavilion, while visitors enjoyed the park and rain drizzled around us. After transcribing and coding the interview, I pulled key concepts and quotes from the exchange. In May 2025, I completed a second interview with Tom over the phone on May 11th, 2025 and transcribed and coded this interview as well. For all interviews and pictures, I had permission from Tom to record and photograph. For Chapter Three, I visited the John Michael Kohler Center Arts Center's (JMKAC) Art Preserve in Sheboygan, Wisconsin on February 8th, 2025. After my field visit, I interviewed Laura Bickford over Zoom on February 24th, 2025; Laura is a curator of artist-built environments for the JMKAC. This interview was recorded with permission, transcribed, and subsequently coded for key concepts. These interviews were analyzed in relationship to the literature reviewed for the purposes of this thesis coupled with the research questions posed above.

Background

This thesis will use a variety of academically derived terms. Folklorists, as many academics do, constantly contest and debate what the most accurate term of folklore is. I operate under a simple definition of folklore: variable, vernacular culture of the people. Further, folk art is studied under specific criteria of its own. For example, folklorists often study folk art under the criteria of a passed-down tradition and a specific cultural group. I will use the term 'folk art' to describe Tom Lakenen's art because I subscribe to a more contemporary, variable definition of folklore—one of vernacular culture. As folklore scholar Daniel Wojcik states, "The concept of the vernacular situates the artist in a variety of contexts, traditions, and social interactions, recognizing the artist's individual and seemingly idiosyncratic creativity within a broader

dynamic of social and cultural influences."[1] I will also use 'artist-built environments' to describe Tom's art, which I will discuss more fully in coming chapters. This term is specifically used for this type of art in both the art history and folklore fields.[2]

There are other terms that scholars would use to describe Tom's art. "Outsider art" and "visionary art" are commonly used while studying self-taught, vernacular artists. While 'outsider' is meant to demonstrate an artists' position as 'outside' the realm of typical, trained, academy art, it also can be taken as the artists being social 'outsiders,' which I find exclusionary nor universally true. In describing 'visionary art,' the American Visionary Art Museum states simply: "In short, visionary art begins by listening to the inner voices of the soul, and often may not even be thought of as 'art' by its creator."[3] I find this definition inadequate for my purposes, as not all art comes from a self-conscious soulful inspiration; it suggests that these artists will have spiritual or religious motives, a suggestion that is refutable. I would also argue that most artists are aware they are creating art.

Some additional background information from this study came from personal experience. As someone whose family has lived in the U.P. for over a hundred years, I was privy to the regional knowledge necessary to understand the contexts behind Tom's art. I spent many summers in Houghton and Keweenaw Counties, hearing Tom's same U.P. accent from my grandparents and the same joking grumbling about South Michigan 'trolls' and drunk Wisconsin snowmobilers and hunters. Growing up, I had always driven by Lakenenland without stopping.

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[1] Index, Daniel Wojcik. *Outsider Art : Visionary Worlds and Trauma*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.

[2] For this work, I have cited and studied a variety of scholars that define and study folk art environments. The works of Leslie Umberger, Lisa Stone, John Beardsley, Daniel Wojcik, and Jo Farb Hernández were most helpful in defining the field. My research exists within a larger web of scholarship on artist-built environments, but delves further into the field of tourism and museology.

[3] American Visionary Art Museum, "What is Visionary Art?" AVAM, Accessed May 18th, 2025. https://www.avam.org/visionary-art-definition

My experiences as a child of a Yooper perhaps made me interested in Tom's art in the first place, and it certainly made me understand some things on a more local level.

Lakenenland by Tom Lakenen

A stone's throw away from Lake Superior, Tom Lakenen's Lakenenland sits on Michigan state highway M-28, nestled in tall, skinny red pines. This self-described 'junkyard art' sculpture park in Michigan's Upper Peninsula is hard to miss from the road, with its large sign and flags welcoming visitors. It lies in Chocolay Township, a small, rural community outside the city of Marquette Michigan. In its gravel parking lot, you can observe license plates from around the U.S., on large RVs, SUVS, and sedans. In the winter, snowmobiles zoom around on the snowy paths. While the park has a large, sheltered pavilion, a pond, and a playground, its main attractions are the dozens of sculptures that Tom has spent around 22 years making. There are playful sculptures of bigfoot, of skeletons riding motorcycles into fire, of dinosaurs, but Tom also makes sculptural depictions of politics in the United States. I was intrigued by Lakenen's art because of its left-leaning, environmentalist, pro-union and blue-collar elements. Tom Lakenen's art represents the folk protest of larger political issues—he counters American conservativism, corporate greed, consumerism, and capitalism through his work.

Tom Lakenen is a recently retired self-taught metal sculptor. Throughout his life, he was a laborer in industrial construction and is a proud and outspoken union member. He told me that he started to weld his creations as a means to get sober. His wife was concerned with the amount of drinking he was doing; he told me it was up to a 30-pack a day. He did not want to go to AA, so he figured that keeping himself busy in his garage was just as good. He said, "you got all this oddball junk that was too good to go in a dumpster. So I just started building stuff..." He

explained, “I'm recreating the things I used to see when I was drinking so. If you’ve never seen stuff like this, you never drink as much as I have, you know?” Tom began to use his yard to display his pieces, and his creations keep taking up more and more space.

The subject of his sculptures ranges from humorous to politically-provoking; he touches on themes from intra-state rivalry, drunk tourists, corporate greed, to union politics. He creates his pieces by himself, indicating only his opinions for public display.

Figure 1.5: Trolls Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

This first image [*figure 1.1*] shows three figures, each representing sports teams that are found in the Upper Midwest: the Green Bay Packers, the Detroit Lions, and the Detroit Red Wings. They are positioned to look as though they are moving, potentially running, under an arch that says “trolls.” In their hands are cans of classic Midwest beers and Fireball whiskey. The Detroit Red Wings statue says, “I’m outa beer,” and the Detroit Lions statue replies, with his tongue out, “Follow me, I have a cooler full.” A steel “Ebbco Beer Filter’s,” cut-out sits below them; Ebbco is a Michigan-based manufacturer of metal filtering systems.

While playful in nature, this piece touches on common issues that locals of the Upper Peninsula face. Year-round, whether for summers on Lake Superior, fall colors and hunting in autumn forests, or snowmobiling in the abundant snow, the people of the U.P. deal with

thousands of tourists from surrounding areas flooding U.P. towns to enjoy what each season has to offer. They drink copiously and are viewed as disruptions to locals' spaces.

In this sculpture, Lakenen illustrates a common joke that Yoopers make about Lower Michiganders; they live south of ("under") the Mackinaw Island Bridge, which is what one has to drive over when traveling to the Lower Peninsula from the U.P., thus they are called "the trolls under the bridge." This rivalry, sometimes friendly fire and sometimes representative of political and cultural divides, is many years old. Lakenen's humorous tone decides to make light of a sometimes-divisive issue.

Figure1. 6: Corporate Greed Pig, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

The tone of the "trolls" statue varies greatly from other sculptures such as the "Genuine North American Corporate Greed Pig" [*figures 1.2 and 1.3*]. These were made in 2004, after the Enron and World Com scandals of the early 2000s, two accounting frauds perpetrated by large corporations. Like many Americans, Lakenen was provoked by these scandals, and thought they represented the aggravating corporate greed of American companies.

Figure 1.3: Close-up of Corporate Greed Pig, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Overcome with anger, he made a statue of a large pig (with the label Enron on it)

taking bites out of a steel representation of the United States. While the pig is taking these bites, he defecates on a very small figure, with the words "Average American Worker" behind him. In the gray steel, the words "Watch your back" are written. While corporations are taking more and more money from the United States, often with no punishment or regulation (at least for years), they can freely swingle American laborers, like Lakenen himself, with high and climbing prices.

His art started getting political after the Enron and WorldCom bankruptcy scandals of the early 2000s. He told me, "You see them clowns. That are just as greedy as could be, and they'd do anything for a dollar and you know they just drive you nuts." Lakenen touches on a variety of political themes in his art, including corporate greed, the 1%, environmentalism, renewable energy, anti-union establishments, and general sentiments of world peace. Like many places in the United States, Upper Michigan tends to lean Democratic in the city, and Republican in rural areas. Lakenenland is in Marquette County, which includes a larger city and very rural areas. Lakenen's area tends to be more divided than some of the surrounding areas. In the 2020 Presidential election, official voting records show 1,982 votes for Biden and 1,785 for Trump between the two Chocolay precincts.[4]

Figure 1.4: The 1% Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Lakenen's anger against greed does not stop with the Corporate Greed Pig. Thirteen years later, Lakenen made a sculpture that depicts the greed of

[4] "Election Results." Marquette County, MI, 2024, https://www.co.marquette.mi.us/departments/county_clerk/election_results.php

"the 1%," a nickname for the top 1% of wealthiest people in the United States [*figure 1.4*]. Lakenen's anger lies in the fact that these 1 percenters make-up so little of the population, but have all the control over the average citizen through government policies, corporate prices, and industries. This humanoid figure of the 1% holds a sign that has a list of things that the 1% has taken away from workers, including "lunch 1h [one-hour lunch], family vacation, dream of owning my own home, health care, education, infrastructure, middle class." The sculpture includes a speech bubble that says, "Take off your shoes I want them too!," directed at a little girl.

Figure 1.7: Right To Work Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Another piece evidently created after politically angering experiences is the "Right to Work" sculpture [*figure 1.5*]. This piece references a very controversial bill passed in 2012 by Governor Rick Snyder, which limits the rights of unions in Michigan. It was only repealed in 2024. As an outspoken union member, this bill directly affected the labor rights of Tom Lakenen. The red, white, and blue metal sculpture shows the words United States being split in half by a hammer held by "Snyder." This hammer is driving a wedge into America; on the wedge are the words "Economy/jobs, health care, education, Iraq, taxes, moral values, and terrorism." Lakenen declares that Governor Snyder was tearing the United States apart by executing this bill.

The theme of unions and labor come up quite often for Lakenen. He worked for many years as a union construction worker. He told me, "Growing up, my family, all my family have

Figure 1.6: Union Ironworkers Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

some, some union or another have been union members and you know, you learn to fight for everything you got and stick up for each other and... You know. Y'all know just the way I am I guess."[5] Lakenen heroizes the figure of an American laborer, agglomerating various labor roles that he himself has worked into a sort of folk figure wearing a union suit. Labor issues can be seen as components to larger political pieces, or the sole focus, like the figure pictured [*figure 1.6*]. This image shows the sculpture of a working man in a red suit and a thumbs-up, with the words "Union Ironworkers: Building America" below him. Lakenen creates a sort of folk figure of American union laborers through this sculpture. While many folk art sculpture parks create figures of Paul Bunyan and Uncle Sam, Lakenen chooses instead to memorialize what he feels are some of the 'true' heroes of America.

Figure 1.7: Close-Up of Mount Rushmore Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

One piece that produced a lot of negative reaction from Michiganders is his depiction of Michigan Democratic Party leaders currently in office [*figures 1.7 and*

[5] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:25:08

1.8]. It depicts four Democrat politicians in a Mount Rushmore-style Mountain, with tourists gathering at the base to view the sculptures. A small figure at the parking lot states, "Look man it's Gretchen." When I asked about this piece, Tom told me:

Figure 1.8: Mount Rushmore Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

> The latest one I guess is with Governor [Gretchen] Whitmer over there, and the Attorney general and Secretary of State and [Lieutenant Governor] Garlin Gilchrist and, you know, rather than, I guess, make one of like Trump, that, I think is a total idiot, but I thought it would probably be better to make ones you know as more of a positive. The ones that are doing good, you know, rather than the negative of the ones that are dipshits-…and I truly believe that Whitmer and all those people are just phenomenal and you know I mean that wasn't just. And I'll just make this, but I definitely believe in them.[6]

While many Michiganders like Governor Whitmer, she angers a lot of Republicans because of her policies; many especially despise the way she handled the COVID-19 pandemic. She has become sort of a controversial figure in Michigan, and some far right-wing Michiganders even plotted to kidnap and murder her but were caught. Lakenen takes a stance that he knows is likely to anger many visitors, but he stays strong in his support for these figures.

Another sculpture strays from themes of political issues and greed into sentiments of peace. This sculpture shows a strong, flowing hair God holding a globe of the World [*figure 1.9*]. He says, "One more fight over there and I'm Drop'in y'as." These apostrophes are indicative of a specific style of the Yooper accent, more common in rural areas and in some older generations.

[6] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:28:05

In this sculpture, Lakenen calls for a united and harmonious world. While Lakenen makes specific references to certain political events and figures throughout Lakenenland, his pieces about peace show his overall hope for the world.

Figure 1.9: God Holding the Earth Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Environmentalism is also an important component to Lakenen's work. As someone who has worked in various laborer roles that allowed him to see first-hand how corporations are changing the environments of the United States, Tom was inspired to enact change through his art. Under a large title of "Take Take Take, how long will it last?" one sculpture states, "Footnote: I hunt, fish, and have trapped. I've worked as a logger, on oil rigs and in mines. I also worked on a farm one time. I am not against any of these jobs or occupations or use of these resources. I do believe it is time to help Planet Earth anyway humanly possible. Renewable Energy, Natural Conservation, Recycling, Sustainable Farming Etc. We all do our part, our grandkids will thank us. Tom Lakenen 2021" [*figure 1.10*]. This sculpture

Figure 1.10: Take Take Take, How Long Will it Last? Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Figure 1.11: Motorcycle Through Flames Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

(which seemingly looks like the end of a truck-load of logs) represents a leftist sentiment that a growing proportion of laborers share: climate change and environmental destruction is not the fault of the workforce at-large, but instead is attributed to the constant greed of larger corporations that do not take the balance of ecosystems into mind.

Figure 1.12: 9/11 Memorial Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

Lakenen does not limit himself to statement pieces. He also creates patriotic pieces, memorial art, and even fun sculptures with no inherent messaging behind them. He has created 9/11 memorials, sculptures of metal skeletons playing in a band, a skeleton motorcyclist jumping through flames, a wolf howling at the moon, and a pig riding a unicycle [see *figures 1.11-1.13*]. While these pieces are less controversial and may get less attention from visitors online, the breadth of this work demonstrates that Tom Lakenen completes the sculptures he wants to, without pressure from people around him.

Figure 1.13: Moon and Stars Sculpture, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

In the beginning, soon after Lakenen started displaying these sculptures, he ran into issues with the board of Chocolay Township. Chocolay is located just outside of Marquette, Michigan, a small but significant U.P. college town. Legally, his sculptures were classified as signs, and he would receive a ticket if people could see his sculptures from the road. He moved the pieces to his backyard, but was disappointed that people couldn't see his art, stating "You know, I mean working construction, if I could keep working enough to survive and keep my sculptures, I just wanted to put them where people could see them."[7] Additionally, his backyard was too small for his growing collection, so in 2003 he expanded bought a cheap plot of 37.5 acres 8 miles from his home, for only $1,000 an acre.

His battle with small-town politics lasted eight years. The town board was relentless, threatening him with tickets for simple things, such as signs visible from the road, health department-approved outhouses built, having a fire during the winter, and retroactively denying previously approved permits. At one point, the township tried to trick him into signing away a significant portion of his land rights for a legal easement. This constant bombardment finally ceased when a lawyer advised him to get the original federal deed to his property, and soon after, a local news station broadcasted his statement, which can now be seen in signs near the entrances of the property:

Figure 1.14: Signs at Back Entrance to Lakenenland, art ©Tom Lakenen, photographed by Linnea Hill with permission from the artist.

[7] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:02:57

"Everybody in the world is welcome except for the planning and zoning board of Chocolay Township" [see *figure 1.14*].

Although Lakenen says he hasn't been bothered by the township for over 10 years, I found that he is still regularly mentioned by the Chocolay Township board meetings. Records from the Township's minutes show the name Lakenen or Lakenenland mentioned 73 times in the last 20 years. A look into the public minutes online shows quotes such as "Rumors are going around in the Township that Lakenenland does not pay taxes."[8] One specific board member seems to bring up the zoning issues again and again, and as a public comment it was stated that he "commented on trying to resolve problem with Lakenen Park sign for seven years. Questioned where in the zoning ordinance is wording to allow a 100 square foot sign? In 2004 [he] applied for a 60 square foot sign and was denied and was told that the zoning ordinance needs to be changed to allow it."[9] Other board members have continuously accused this board member of harassing Lakenenland, and the community at-large is outspoken about their support for Lakenenland. The town board has received many letters and speeches from Chocolay Township residents asking for Tom to be left alone.

What is especially significant about Lakenen is his independence. He creates his art by himself (though his mother sometimes helps with painting) to represent his sole opinion. He is proud of his independence and works to maintain it. I asked him if he was eligible to receive any artist grants to keep Lakenenland afloat. He told me, "No, because I'm not a nonprofit… If I was a nonprofit then the government has some control over you. And I said, you know what? Take all

[8] "2017 Township Board Combined Minutes," Chocolay Township, Michigan, 2017, https://chocolay.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2017boardminutes.pdf
[9] "2011 Township Board Combined Minutes," Chocolay Township, Michigan, 2011, https://chocolay.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2011boardminutes.pdf

your grant money and shove it. I don't want no part of it. I don't want nobody telling me what to do, so probably suffer in the long run, but you know, I guess it's just the way I am."[10]

This independence is especially significant considering his outward-facing position as a tourist destination. Tom's role as an artist fits into discussions from John Beardsley's book, *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*. Beardsley describes artist-built environments as spaces of private speculation where an artist's own personal beliefs are put on display. These beliefs are meant to communicate and often persuade an audience, but the artists do not let the opinions of visitors sway their convictions. Beardsley states, "Visionary artists don't pander to their audience. They are emphatic about conveying their personal insights, regardless of whether or not they might be popular. Nor do their environments present a sanitized version of either past or future" (21). While Lakenen does not accommodate his audience in his artwork itself, he adjusts the amenities of the sculpture park for tourists; he has a large parking lot, bathrooms, playgrounds, campfires, and even free hot chocolate on winter days. Tom wants visitors, but his art is made on his own terms. He states, "I don't make stuff for other people I just make it for out here, you know, and try to make it for somebody else, and it's like, well, maybe they won't like it… No, I'm going to make it however I want and people can look at it and if they like it, good, and if they don't, that's fine too."[11]

Lakenenland fits into a wider discussion of roadside expressions. Americans express many aspects of culture on the roadside, whether in large-scale, mass cultural expressions, or small-scale, folk cultural expressions. Religion can be seen in billboards damning passersby to hell, or in roadside crosses and memorials. Politics can be seen in frequent yard signs across the country, or in sculpture parks like Lakenenland. The situation of folk art on the roadside

[10] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:36:31
[11] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:40:27

characterizes a unique, vernacular expression of political messaging that is unfiltered and passionate. Lakenen's political feelings are bigger than a simple sign stating his preference for a candidate. Politics at the roadside often aims to influence, and art at the roadside often aims to inspire. For Lakenen, it is an attempt of protest against something that is perceived to be too big to deal with. He told me, "And there's really nothing the average person can do about it. You know? What are you going to do, go take them to court? Good luck with that, you know. But you can make a pig about 'em, you know?" For Lakenen, and many artists across the United States, art is a medium in which protest can be facilitated. Lakenenland engages in different levels of politics, which are approached with humor and different levels of seriousness adjusted to their respective impacts on the world.

Many roadside attractions also fit into the genre of artist-built environments. SPACES (Saving + Preserving Arts + Cultural Environments) is an organization of scholars from a variety of fields (such as art history, folklore, and historic preservation) that is dedicated to preserving and documenting artist-built environments; they define these art environments as "personal spaces like homes, gardens, and studios that have been fully transformed into continually evolving, site-specific, and life-encompassing works of art."[12] Different scholars have pushed some definitions over others to describe this phenomena, but the general consensus is that artist-built environments are physical spaces that are transformed by an artist, thus transforming an area into a large-scale, thematic, and complex art piece.

Tom's work fits into many of the various definitions that scholars use to describe artist-built environments. In order to define Lakenenland as an artist-built environment, I read Jay

[12] "What is an Art Environment," SPACES Archives, accessed April 29th, 2025, https://spacesarchives.org/about-us/what-is-an-art-environment/#:~:text=Art%20environments%20are%20personal%20spaces,life%2Dencompassing%20works%20of%20art.

Laurence Platt's master's thesis, *Fixing Dreams: Preserving America's Folk Art Environments* (1996). his work includes a well-rounded definition of artist-built environments that takes different disciplines into consideration. Platt defines folk art environments as fulfilling these nine categories, with which I will use to define Lakenenland as such:

1. "Creation of self-taught artist who works primarily alone."

Tom had no formal training in metal sculpture work; the only art classes he had ever taken were the high school classes that were required for him to graduate. He completes his projects alone, though sometimes his mother comes through and paints the sculptures in her leisure—Lakenen told me he hates painting.

2. "Large-scale, immobile works."

Tom's sculptures are large and metal, and he has a playground, a pavilion, and a shelter. His work is meant to be viewed as sort of an "outdoor museum," with large stationary sculptures and visitor-centered components (such as the playground).

3. "Elements of architecture, sculpture, and/or landscape design are incorporated."

Lakenenland is a sculpture park that includes a bog walk, a picnic pavilion, a playground, and a shelter for sitting around a fire, among other things. He plays into the natural landscapes of the North woods of Michigan, as the sculptures are weaved between trees and along gravel (or snow in the winter) paths.

4. "Found or readily available materials are used, often in unexpected ways."

Tom uses scrap material from his jobs and the jobs of his family and friends. He told me, "most of it's just whatever I can make out of the stuff that I've collected. You know, you got some oddball scrap here…And I still got lots of scrap. I just retired in February, I think I said that. I got lots of scrap and my daughter is an iron worker with iron workers Local 8. She just become a

journeyman and my boy is a heavy equipment mechanic, so they both have access to scrap" [citation needed 00:05:16]. Tom says he always has "oddball junk that was too good to go in a dumpster" laying around from various sources.[13]

5. "Built over extended period, often in the artist's later years."

Tom has been building Lakenenland since 2003. Since he has recently retired (as of February 2024) is now able to spend more time building and maintaining Lakenenland.

6. "Sense of permanence."

Tom owns the property and has fought to keep it running. He has no plans of moving, just expanding. He told me that if he were to get enough donations, his larger goal would to buy more land and expand the park, but for now he is focused on maintaining what he has.

7. "Often expressive of artist's personal beliefs or experience."

Clearly, Tom's art expresses both his environmentalism beliefs, his politics, his community, his state of Michigan, and his experiences in various roles in construction. He does not try to appease visitors who may disagree with his personal opinions, especially his political views, because it is *his* sculpture park and *his* art.

8. "Adjacent to or incorporating artist's home."

Tom lives on the property, in a house mostly hidden from public eye. His house is not accessible and not part of the sculpture park, but he goes to and from the house and property all day to maintain the sculptures, do landscaping, or set out hot chocolate for snowmobilers. A lot of people do not know that he lives in a house on the property, and he stated, "When I started it back here and be sitting there with the with the wood stove and the coffee pot and stuff and snowmobilers would go by and they're like, what the hell is this?... You know some hermit living

[13] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:01:43

out in the woods here or what? You know, they're coming from the cities and don't realize that we actually got a house with electricity and running water, you know."[14]

9. "Not commercially motivated" (p. 29).

There is no fee to enter Lakenenland. While Tom will accept donations and has a donation box, entry will always be free. His wife does run a t-shirt stand, but the prices are very reasonable and it seems more of a side-project; it definitely does not make enough to fund things like land purchases. He says, "I guess making money is not our big goal, you know, obviously."[15] Part of this is because of his experiences working as a laborer:

> Being in construction and working for a living, you know, I guess I've always had a kind of a soft spot for people that were out working, making a living and weren't born with a silver spoon in their mouth, you know? And I say, especially the ones that are greedy and, you know, think they're better than you because they got a bunch of money. It's like, the hell with you, you know? And I don't ever want to charge anybody to come in here, because even though the rich wouldn't have no problem with it, I don't want a car load of kids to go by because they ain't got 10 bucks to get in, you know?

Tom Lakenen's Lakenenland fits into every single criterion that Platt describes, therefore would be classified as an artist-built environment. This places Tom's work in a network of pre-existing scholarship on artist-built environments, in a conversation that has been occurring across disciplines.

Some scholars tack on additional definitions and characteristics of artist-built environments. Jo Farb Hernández states, "despite the uniqueness and idiosyncrasies of each art environment site, many face similar predicaments in terms of community response and governmental pressure."[16] This point of contention between community and artist is an important

[14] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:38:21
[15] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:40:23
[16] P. 15, Jo Farb Hernández, and Luisa Del Giudice. "Local Art, Global Issues: Tales of Survival and Demise Among Contemporary Art Environments." In Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development, 29-. Fordham University Press, 2014. doi:10.5422/fordham/9780823257966.003.0001.

and very common quality of artist-built environments, especially with art that is controversial or particularly visible. Tom's work was targeted again and again by Chocolay Township and was the discussion of many township board meetings over the years.

Within the scholarly realm of artist-built environments, there are many debates over correct terminology. Some scholars say that "folk art" or "folk art environments" is not quite the right description of the sites, because, as Jo Farb Hernández states, it "implies work linked to a collective heritage, reflective of shared standards and aesthetics, and transmitted across generations."[17] Others think that the term "folk" indicates low-quality art because of its nontraditional, self-taught nature of the art, despite many in the field of folklore arguing otherwise. While I will use a variety of terms in this paper, including artist-built environments, art environments, roadside attractions, roadside folk-art, and folk-art environments, I believe that in certain cases these terms can be interchangeable or at least related. The field of folklore (and the term folk and folklore itself) has always been fluid and variable, as is the nature of the field. These environments are created by the folk as a response to imagination, freedom, and inspiration, and the fact that there are many instances of folk-art environments means there is value in this form of human creative expression.

By comparing Lakenenland to other artist-built environments, one can get a general sense for how the sites are interpreted by both visitors, scholars, and community members. In *Fixing Dreams,* Platt discusses a wide variety of folk-art environments, including Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain and Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village, both in California. These two environments are very often cited and studied by scholars of artist-built environments because of their sheer scale and the amount of effort that was put into making them.

[17] P.2, Giudice and Hernández.

Salvation Mountain is in Niland, California. Leonard Knight labored on for many years to create his extensive structure, halting his work after 28 years. Knight passed away in 2014. It is full of bright colors and tunnels, disrupting the extensive browns and oranges of the Colorado Desert. The top of the mountain says, "God is Love," with a declaration under it stating, "Jesus I'm a sinner please come upon my body, and into my heart." Like many artist-built environments, Knight used inexpensive materials such as junk, cement, and sand. These materials are covered by gallons upon gallons of paint, a lot of which was also collected from the junk yard. Admission is free, and the site is maintained by volunteer docents.

Salvation Mountain is enjoyed by community residents and tourists alike. It is positioned near Slab City, an unofficial settlement on government land that invites snowbirds, travelers, and people of alternative or nonconventional lifestyles. It receives thousands of tourists every year. Journalist Emma Grillo states, "They arrive by car and by bus, sometimes traveling across oceans to see Mr. Knight's work. Some are religious, while others are drawn more by the artwork's aesthetic than the messages of faith running up and down and across the artwork."[18] Recently, Salvation Mountain has received increasing attention both online and in-person because of social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok.

Like Lakenenland, Leonard Knight ran into many issues with the local government. The local country wanted to open a campground near Salvation Mountain, and they sent out a toxic waste specialist who found high levels of lead in the soil around the site. After this, "the County petitioned the State of California for funds to tear down the mountain and haul it away to a toxic waste disposal dumpsite in Nevada," but Knight was supported by his community and submitted

[18] Emma Grillo. "Salvation Mountain in California Searches for How to Save Itself." *The New York Times.* September 10th, 2023. Accessed April 16th, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/10/style/salvation-mountain-california.html

new samples that had much lower levels of lead.[19] There are now efforts to purchase the land officially, and it has been named a "Historically Significant Property and Historic Resource" by Southern California's Imperial County Board of Supervisors.[20]

Bottle Village by Tressa "Grandma" Prisbrey is another commonly discussed roadside attraction and folk-art environment. In Simi Valley, California, Prisbrey created simple structures out of glass bottles and concrete. She made a variety of buildings, such as a nondenominational chapel and a schoolhouse. She led tours and became a hotspot for tourists; "On her newly minted Bottle Village sign, tours were originally advertised as ten cents for children and a quarter for adults, but the cost gradually increased over time. She made the executive decision to begin charging admission after numerous bouts of theft—likely a result of the prolific increase in visitors after the site was listed as a must-see by the Automobile Club of Southern California."[21] Her folk-art environment turned tourist destination was a big hit in the Southern California car tourism realm.

Like Salvation Mountain, Bottle Village faced issues with its preservation. The site was significantly damaged by an earthquake, in the 1990s had "become the focus of a bubbling dispute over the allocation of $436,000 in Federal disaster relief to repair damages it sustained…"[22] Many local politicians had strongly opposed disaster relief funding for the Bottle Village. But, also like Salvation Mountain, the site was eventually preserved by the local and

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[19] David G. Bromley and Stephanie Urlass, "About Salvation Mountain: A Testament to the Determination of Many and the Tenacity of One." *Salvation Mountain Inc.* 2013. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://salvationmountain.org/salvation-mountain/about-salvation-mountain/

[20] Elaine Velie. "California's Iconic Salvation Mountain Designated a Historic Site." *Hyperallergic,* January 9th, 2024. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://hyperallergic.com/865677/californias-iconic-salvation-mountain-designated-a-historic-site/

[21] Elizabeth Driscoll Smith. "Roadside California: Tressa Prisbrey's Bottle Village , Theme Parks, and Art Tourism in the Golden State." *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art,* Fall 2023. https://journalpanorama.org/article/on-the-road-reconsidered/tressa-prisbrey/

[22] Patricia Leigh Brown. "Reading the Message in the Bottles." *The New York Times.* February 6th, 1997. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/06/garden/reading-the-message-in-the-bottles.html

state governments, as it became both a Ventura County Cultural Landmark and a California Registered Historical Landmark.[23]

These two case studies show both the legal barriers and community support that creators of artist-built environments encounter. Considering the types of attention these environments receive can help scholars examine the meaning and value for these sites. By examining these troubles and triumphs, one can not only see how folk-art environments are treated by locals and tourists, but also by governments. Scholars of artist-built environments work to understand not only why this art was created, but what it reveals about human creativity and the societal value of art.

While some tourists make specifically planned visits to these sites, others may happen across them by simple chance. This latter component is especially true of Lakenenland. These sites are important enough culturally and aesthetically that people will drive potentially hundreds of miles to observe the site. They are often welcomed by the artist, and in Grandma Prisbrey's case, they were given special tours. Even when visitors randomly happen across a site, they are clearly eye-catching and significant enough to warrant someone's time when they have a different destination. Considering the significance of various visits can help scholars situate the societal value of these sites overall.

While Tom still is creating his art and solely runs his sculpture park, the same local governmental issues apply to him. However, it seems now that Tom's issues with the board have been mostly resolved. In 2011, he was named Chocolay Area Business Association's Citizen of the Year. Township board minutes stated,

[23] Jo Farb Hernández, Rich Gabe, and Seymour Rosen. "Tressa 'Grandma' Prisbrey's Bottle Village. SPACES Archives. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/grandma-prisbreys-bottle-village/

> Mr. Lakenen is recognized for his generous contributions to the Township, our citizens, and the wonderful sculpture park that he has created in our Township. His selfless spirit and attitude have promoted many good causes. His commitment to the community is evident by hosting numerous community events, such as an annual Halloween party and summer concerts. His sculpture park, Lakenenland, has become a tourist destination and has put our Township on the snowmobile maps. Declared this 20th day of December, 2011 in and for the Charter Township of Chocolay.

Because of community members advocating for Lakenen (and lawyers working on his behalf), the Chocolay Township board has stopped their harassment of Tom. Tom's increasing popularity online (on social media and tourism sites) could have contributed to this shift in treatment, as the tourism industry has vastly changed due to online communities. Perhaps, they see the value in self-expression and art, or possibly they see the touristic value of Lakenenland and the money that tourists can bring to the town.

Lakenen's art is protest against large and powerful entities. Often, people feel impotent when protesting something dominant and influential. He states, [Corporate greed is] "the kind of stuff where it's fun to make a sculpture out of it, because what else are you going to do? You know? I mean, one person. Let's see here. I can go stand out on the road and tell everybody what I think. But, you know, that doesn't do any good." For Tom, there's a degree of separation between involved in live protest versus protest through art. Lakenen engages with visual satire and caricatures as a way to use the tools he has as a citizen with little political power.

Lakenen not only navigates national politics through art but also local town politics. As described above, Lakenen dealt with complicated and downright sneaky town 'policies,' without ever knowing why he was targeted. This local level of politics caused him to create art related to his experience, significantly with his 'Killdozer' sculpture [*figure 1.15*]. His sculpture of a bulldozer is a tribute to Marvin Heemeyer, a small business owner from Colorado who used a steel-plated bulldozer to destroy the buildings of townspeople who had attempted to ruin his business. Lakenen says, "I can completely understand Marvin's state of mind after dealing with

small-town government myself. I haven't had any problems with the township officials in over 10 years, but this bulldozer runs if I ever need it."[24]

Figure 1.15: Marvin Heemeyer Tribute, art ©Tom Lakenen, photograph from Lakenenland: The U.P.'s Most Unique Junkyard Art Park *(see footnote 24).*

Overall, Lakenen's goal is not money, as he charges no admission fees, but visibility and community. He gets excitement out of having many visitors, from tourists traveling around Lake Superior in the summer to snowmobilers riding on the trail behind Lakenenland throughout the winter. Art on the roadside is rooted in landscape and community awareness. Lakenen relies on scrap metal from local laborers and money from donations. He approaches protest through art, and often through humor. His form of anti-institution and anti-greed political folk art does not expect mutual agreement or even understanding from all visitors, but it does prompt mutual awareness about his strong political opinions. Lakenen's folk art demonstrates one form of political protest in America, but it is tied to larger concepts, such as tourism. Tom's work can be situated within the scholarly discussions of art environments and the treatment of such in the art world. In the coming chapters, I will explore the sociological aspects of tourism and the placement of art-environments in museums, using the context of Lakenenland I have described above.

[24] P. 9, Tom Lakenen, ed. Nancy Barr. *Lakenenland: The U.P.'s Most Unique Junkyard Art Park.* 2024.

Chapter 2

Tourism and Folk Culture

In America, the tourism industry reigns supreme. Americans spend a lot of time behind the wheel, traveling on thousands of miles of highways. The tourism industry not only capitalizes on natural wonders, but has created a network of roadside attractions, big and small, to entice tourists for a visit. Some roadside attractions are massive industries, like Disneyland or Disney World, while others are locally-run, one-off kitschy points of interest, like Lakenenland. Regardless of their size, roadside attractions are engrained in the touristic landscape of the United States. They are also intrinsically tied to folk culture and consumerism, to landscapes and tourism.

Roadside attractions are attention-grabbing stopping points that are placed beside roadways, usually accessible and advertised to the average traveler. Oftentimes, they follow regional trends, such as Paul Bunyan statues in the Upper Midwest, and sometimes their iconography is common across the entire United States, such as Muffler Men customized to a business' wares. In traveling across the nation, the average traveler can expect to see a sign for all types of roadside attractions; "World's Largest Ball of Twine!," "Mystery Spot," "Wall Drug," "Confusion Hill," "The World's Only Corn Palace!"

To better situate my research with other scholarly works, I reviewed tourism theory literature, including Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* and John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. These two books gave me a base understanding for the sociological and cultural operations of tourism, particularly in the United States; through this

literature, I can better understand the visitor experience of roadside attractions, such as Lakenenland, and how folk culture is understood and encountered through American tourism.

Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* argues that tourist attractions are cultural productions that allow societies to package, present, and consume what it considers "authentic" cultures. MacCannell views leisure (and thus tourism) as a central formation of a post-modern society's identity. Previously, identity was primarily formed around class and occupation. According to MacCannell, identity is better understood under the realm of leisure and recreation—someone describes themselves as an artist, outdoorsman, and a reader before they are a receptionist or an accountant. Class still largely factors into identity, as it affects the potential leisure time that an individual in society has. He believes that as the world becomes more post-modern, "modern mass leisure" becomes more prevalent. MacCannell's work was important for my work as it provided the necessary background for framing tourism as a somewhat disconnected spectacle from the social expectations of 'real life,' or non-tourist spaces. When an individual acts as a tourist, there are different expectations for how attractions operate. Tourists are searching for an 'authentic experience,' and when something does not fit their rigid expectations of authenticity, disappointment follows.

John Urry's *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* is a sociological study into how the 'gaze' of tourists are directed and constructed within the tourism industry. Urry discusses the historical timeline and trajectory of tourism in American history, and how media, status, experiences, and authenticity intertwine. John Urry argues that the fetishized anticipation of tourism creates preconceived notions of expected pleasure; these preconceptions are crafted and upheld by a combination of media and advertising. This book was helpful for understanding the sociological visitor experience that applies to Lakenenland.

These two readings discuss tourist attractions extensively. MacCannell centers post-modernism as his framing and discusses 'authenticity' as what tourists are after, while Urry explores how the tourist 'gaze' is constructed through preconceived expectations. These books were especially important for considering the visitor experiences of Lakenenland, especially because most of Tom's visitors are tourists, according to him. John Urry's book was especially important while looking at online reviews of Lakenenland. While many visitors are largely supportive of Lakenen and his work, the park's Google Review page reveals some opposition. Amongst all the glowing reviews, one can see people call his art "liberal b.s.," "leftist propaganda funded by the D.N.C.," "a shrine to some of the world's most horrendous people," and "a bunch of commie stuff," some even going so far as to say that Lakenen was 'suffering from a mental illness." Some appreciate the work itself but do not like Tom's politics, stating "Very cool metalwork sculptures. Skip the political statements please" and "Was cool other then [sic] the misguided political statement that left a bad taste in my mouth." Clearly, some visitors had their visits 'ruined' by the political art, while some wish that it was devoid of any political statements.

Often, people search through these comments to plan potential tourism experiences. Urry writes: "These travel-community websites featuring user-contributed travel reviews are conceived as being more sincere than the always glossy brochures and home pages of the tourism industry."[25] Users on there are most often tourists looking to, as one person said on Yelp, "[spend] about 30 minutes here as a 'get out of the car' and see something unique while traveling across the UP from east to west."[26] No matter their stance on the content of Lakenenland, every

[25] P. 57, John Urry and Larsen Jonas. *The Tourist Gaze 3.0.* London: Sage Publications, 2011
[26] Yelp Review by Dave C., Lakenenland Sculpture Park, *Yelp,* Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://www.yelp.com/biz/lakenenland-sculpture-park-marquette?sort_by=rating_asc

visitor expects to gain an experience there as a tourist; they are operating their experiences as tourists.

Visitor experience is a central to understanding the meaning of roadside attractions in American folk culture. While many other scholars of artist-built environments have mostly centered on specifically artists and their work, there is less of a focus on audience and spaces. However, it is important to consider how visitor experience can help give a site meaning. Often, artist-built environments and roadside attractions are part of a performance; tourists enter the space and complete walk-throughs, construct narratives, and complete touristic rituals. Sites always have meanings as outward and internal performances, and meanings are not separated from self. Visitors are thrust into an evolving and ever-changing art piece, and as Jo Farb Hernandez states, "This time-based element also promotes the intermingling of visual arts and performance events by way of the participatory and interactive dialogue that is set up with site visitors as they physically enter into and explore the creator's constructions."[27]

In the book *The Cultural Moment in Tourism,* cultural geography scholar David Crouch states that "particular sites, 'places', are not neutral but cultural text[s] that people read and recognize, directed by the particular intentions of a producer or promoter. With performativity, space ceases to be only contextual." [28] Through Lakenenland, people are interacting with not only the site as a physical space, but what the site metaphorically represents to him and to them. Artist-built environments are often more enigmatic than other forms of tourism. Tourists are in

[27] P. 10, Jo Farb Hernández, and Luisa Del Giudice. "Local Art, Global Issues: Tales of Survival and Demise Among Contemporary Art Environments." In Sabato Rodia's Towers in Watts: Art, Migrations, Development, 29-. Fordham University Press, 2014. doi:10.5422/fordham/9780823257966.003.0001.
[28] p. 27, Crouch, David. "Meaning, encounter and performativity: Threads and moments of spacetimes in doing tourism." in Smith, L., Waterton, E., & Watson, S. (2012). *The cultural moment in tourism* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203831755

search of an experience, and many artist-built environments offer a someone mysterious or puzzling, interpretive art experience.

Tourists often have high expectations for their trips. Dean MacCannell states that tourism and leisure are at the center of a post-modern world. He states that "leisure is displacing work from the center of modern social arrangements" (50), which is part of the reason that expectations from visitors are so high and specific. People spend countless hours planning trips, earning money for these trips, and developing idealized visions of their upcoming journeys. In these planning hours, tourists have a fixed, romanticized expectation of their vacation, and when this expectation is not met, their fantasies are broken and their trip is almost 'ruined.'

These reviewers feel entitled to control over Tom's art just because of its 'public' position on the roadside. They view Lakenenland not as a site for contemplation and mystery, but as a tourist trap designed for them, when in fact Lakenenland is private land. In tourism, often the concept of individuality escapes the tourists' minds; they view the sites in mass, and therefore have expected these sites to be created with the masses in mind. When something is open to the public in general, it is expected to be almost neutral space, like a park. Tourists neglect that Tom is one person, creating art for himself that represent solely his ideas, his opinions, and his experiences. They visit his personal, and technically private, property, but they view it as theirs.

I believe a lot of this is due to Lakenen's publicity in travel magazines and in tourism guides. You can see Lakenenland advertised by the Detroit Free Press[29] as "Lakenenland: The

[29] Mandi Wright. "Lakenenland: The Coolest Unofficial Rest Stop in the Upper Peninsula." *Detroit Free Press,* March 2nd, 2015. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://www.freep.com/videos/news/columnists/john-carlisle/2015/03/02/24241551/

coolest unofficial rest stop in the Upper Peninsula," by Go Valley Kids[30] as "Family Fun at Lakenenland, a FREE Sculpture Park in the UP Michigan!," or even featured on the official Michigan travel and tourism site, Pure Michigan.[31] Because of this, many do not view Lakenen as an independent artist with his own political views, and his roadside positioning and his widely promoted location invites them to a touristic experience. The signs welcome visitors in, the playground allows parents a break, and the pavilion allows groups to enjoy a picnic; these activities are all packaged by these websites as a perfect vacation stop.

Urry discusses the role of media in creating a specific touristic vision. The rise of the internet and travel websites can completely dictate tourists' expectations. Because of this increased and near-constant internet media flow, travelers now can comment on travel destinations and craft narratives that are entirely visitor-focused; there is often no input from the people that run the attraction, like Tom Lakenen. This can lead to misconceptions in the original context of a site's conception. Travelers might think that Tom is attempting to start a large-scale tourist attraction to earn money, not a folk artist working on his independent art, therefore their expectations of what the site should entail are catered to this mindset.

Perhaps, the negative reviews have something to do with the t-shirt stand, which Lakenen's wife Lisa has set up to help keep the sculpture park going with some sales. It could be that since part of the park may be seen as 'commercial,' the audience views Lakenen's park as a corporate entity rather than a folk artist. They may not consider that the revenue from the t-shirt stand is a side project that attempts to aid their shoestring budget.

[30]Amanda Chavez "Family Fun at Lakenenland, A Free Sculpture Park in the UP Michigan." *Go Valley Kids,* August 18th 2022. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://govalleykids.com/lakenenland-sculpture-park-michigan/
[31] "Lakenenland Sculpture Park." Pure Michigan. *Michigan Economic Development Corporation*. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://www.michigan.org/property/lakenenland-sculpture-park

Tom's work being positioned as a typical, commercial tourist attraction may be attributed in-part to his local township. When Chocolay Township's Business Association named him citizen of the year in 2011, part of the reason they stated was "His sculpture park, Lakenenland, has become a tourist destination and has put our Township on the snowmobile maps."[32] Clearly, Lakenenland has extra value to the town not as art itself, but because of its potential for recognition and revenue for a relatively rural area. Lakenenland is now considered in Chocolay's official recreation plan; the park is seen as sort of a recreational opportunity for the town [*see figure 2.1*]. Where they had previously seen legal issues, they now see room for touristic growth and operations.

Private Sites

Table 4 shows the recreational opportunities available at privately-owned sites located in the Township.

Table 4 Private Sites

Recreation Opportunity	Recreation Sites					
	Chocolay Bayou Nature Preserve	Chocolay River RV Campground	Gitche Gumee RV Park	Homestead Golf	Lakenenland	Ojibwa Casino RV Park
Camping		● A, B	● A, B, C			● B
Fishing	■ D ● D	● D			● E	
Golf		■ G		● F		
Open space		●	●	●	●	
Picnic location		●	●		●	
Restroom facilities		● L	● L	● L	● K	
Sculptures / artwork					●	
Trails	● I ■ H	■ H	■ H		● H, I ■ H	
Total On-Site Amenities	**2**	**6**	**6**	**3**	**7**	**1**

Figure 2.1: Chocolay Recreation Table. See footnote 29.

Tom thinks that part of the reason the Township has left his alone in recent years is because of Lakenenland-related tourism. He told me that his website is linked on the Chocolay Township webpage, but he has not received "so much as a free garbage can" from them. He was not aware that he is part of their recreation plans for the area (their "big master plan" as he called it), nor does he care. His goal is to make art and have fun doing it.

As one visitor states on Lakenenland's Google Reviews, "Pretty good, but too political with the artwork. I go on vacation to escape politics." Even some reviewers that enjoyed their visit to Lakenenland often still view it under the lens of tourism, as some reviews state: "Wish I

[32]"2011 Township Board Combined Minutes," Chocolay Township, Michigan, 2011, https://chocolay.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/2011boardminutes.pdf

could give more than 5 stars. An outstanding must-see stop on any UP trip," "Saw it. Made a uturn expecting a 10 minute stop. We were there 2 hours. Such a fun diversion to our road trip!!!" and "Will be a regular stop on our trips up!" Visitors are often surprised when Lakenen gets political, as to them, vacations and personal, intimate views on politics do not mix. These touristic interpretations fit into discussions from John Urry. Urry states, "tourists tend to have high expectations of what they should receive since 'going away' is normally endowed with significance and anticipated through advertising and marketing undertaken by tourist organizations. People are looking for the extraordinary and hence will be critical of services appearing to undermine such quality" (p. 50). Being confronted with political views, especially so different from one's own, does not fit into what tourists expect of out a vacation, thus ruining their 'authentic' experience.

When I asked Lakenen about his reviews, he told me, "Yeah, like I say, you're never going to make everybody happy, you know? ... If you want to make something different, go right on ahead. It's a free country, you know, and I say you don't have to wait to get your money back. Just get the hell out of here if you don't like it." While many visitors feel that Lakenen has to mediate his art according to the values of his visitors, he does not share in their sentiments and does not conform to their beliefs.

Tom Lakenen thus resists the expectation that he 'pleases the tourist' through his art. He is not creating a park that is oriented towards tourists, or leftists, or conservatives. While Tom is happy to have visitors observe the art, he is making art that is inspired by experiences and views he alone has. Tom can even poke fun at U.P. tourists, as seen in the "Trolls" sculpture in my first chapter. While Tom will always welcome visitors, he still does not cater the content of his art to his audience to make them happy.

While many roadside attractions were made as an individual passion project, or to commemorate a central aspect of a small town's culture, some of them build a whole brand out of being a stop for tourists on longer road trips. A lot of roadside attractions get visitors not as a destination, but as a stopping point for road-trippers. Regardless of their role, they came to represent true Americanness; attractions are engrained in the physical and immaterial landscape of America. Landscapes are closely linked to culture; John Urry states, "Thus, 'landscape' is a human way of visually forming, through cultivated eyes, skilful techniques and technologies of representing, a physical environment. Hence, 'a landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings' (Cosgrove, 1984: 1)" (94). Roadside attractions are a part of the American landscape through the strong cultural importance of tourism. Roadside attractions monumentalize American-ness. They also represent the perceived 'newness' of American culture, as they are particularly more frequent in the Western states of the U.S. because of the more recent car-dependent infrastructures and more abundance of space.

Regional identities are represented in many roadside attractions. In the Midwest, you might find the 'world's largest sculpture of a muskie," or a loon, or of a cow. In states like South Dakota or Arizona, you can visit "Wild West Towns," many of which are fabricated for tourists alone. In Northern California, many tourist attractions relate to the Redwood forests, with drive-through trees and Bigfoot statues. These roadside attractions often highlight the identities that tourists have assigned to them in order to create revenue from the tourists. Or, like Lakenenland's sculpture of the 'hero union man' (as seen in Chapter 1) they can represent individual identities and heroes.

I found that there is a large distinction between folk versus more consumerist forms of roadside attractions and tourism. Roadside America is a distinct cultural phenomenon; no other

country has the same car-dependent tourist culture, where the political, the religious, the artistic, the environmental aspects of Americanism can be distinctly observed. There are plenty of consumerist roadside attractions that represent the mass media and consumerist sides of America—Disneyland, theme parks, and natural-wonders-turned tourist traps—but it is when roadside attractions take a more grassroots and localized approach to tourism that the folk culture of America can be observed.

Lakenenland is a member of the anti-institutional folk group of tourism. His work exists, not directly intentionally, as a counter to those of large corporations—such as Disneyland—that attempt to define American road culture within their consumerist practices. While places like Disneyland rely on the expectations of tourists to drive their profits and vision for the tourist attraction, Lakenen creates his art independently and does not respond to the anticipations that tourists have. When so much of American travel is reliant on consumption and touristic control, places like Lakenenland push back against the modern expectations of an 'authentic' tourist experience. Many folklorists and art historians do not study artist-built environments under the realm of tourism or visitor experience; there is value in this type of inquiry to discover how visitors can contribute meaning to folk art.

Tom thinks what really sets him apart from large-scale tourist attractions (such as Disneyland) is his financial situation. He stated, "once you start trying to do it where you're making money, well hell I might as well just go and get a job and go back to work then."[33] Tom, like many other folk artists, are making art for themselves first, and get gratification about people viewing their art and enjoying it. He said, "It's more just for fun and, you know, … and then you get too much or like, say, get it too commercialized, where you're trying to make a profit or

[33] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:11:28.

something and then you, you know, you start thinking about how much money you can make, and how much you can get out of each tourist, and it ruins it both for me and for the tourists."[34] To Tom, Lakenenland would not have as much value if his goal was money, like it is for Disney.

John Urry describes Disneyland like an 'experience economy.' He states, "In a fully-fledged experience economy, customers fly with, eat and shop at, and book into with those businesses that not only meet basic needs and functions in the here-and-now, but turn them into personal and memorable experiences that remain in the memory."[35] Disneyland was crafted specifically for the 'tourist gaze'; its workers are trained to accommodate visitors with a smile, its intention is to create good memories for consumers, it crafts grandiose structures and rides with the intention of pleasing tourists and therefore grabbing their money. Disneyland is what media presents as a "the American vacation," its reputation known internationally. I argue that it is Lakenenland and other roadside folk-art environments that truly represent America—that represent the real people, the 'folk,' of our culture. When a 'common man' of extraordinary creativity single-handedly crafts a sculpture park, the inner workings of American folk culture is revealed.

Other scholars have made comments on this distinction, though have not solely focused on it. Author Jane Stern states,

> For those of you too young to know what a roadside attraction is, let me explain. Unlike big "fun" corporate endeavors like Disney World or Busch Gardens, a true roadside attraction was a brainchild of an individual with a vision. These people were usually oddball folks who lived in rural areas. Ignited by their own passions or obsessions, they invited the public in to see what they had devoted their life's work to."[36]

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[34] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:10:38.
[35] P. 53, Urry, John, and Larsen Jonas. *The Tourist Gaze 3.0.* London: Sage Publications, 2011.
[36] Jane Stern. "The End of Roadside Attractions." *The Paris Review,* April 9th, 2025. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2025/04/09/the-end-of-roadside-attractions/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Lit%20Hub%20Daily:%20April%2010%2C%202025&utm_term=lithub_master_list

While Disneyland can be classified as a roadside attraction in theory, some scholars theorize that it does not represent the true spirit of roadside America. It is instead a consumerist fallacy and caricature that corporations want people to think America is, so as to profit from it.

Other scholars call into question this comparison between theme parks and artist-built environments. In *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists*, John Beardsley discusses and celebrates artist-built environments as 'gardens of revelation.' He states, "In comparison to theme parks, in other words, visionary environments provoke and free the imagination rather than control it. They represent a stubborn resistance to the mass-marketed leisure purveyed by corporate culture" (21). While these artists may not directly be creating their environments as a counter to corporate roadside attractions (such as Disneyland), they represent the folk resistance to consumerist activity.

Some folk artists are even aware of the differences between their art and Disney. Tressa Prisbrey of Bottle Village wrote, "Anyone can do something with a million dollars. Look at Disney. But it takes more than money to make something out of nothing, and look at the fun I have doing it."[37] While a lot of roadside artists may get compared to Disney (especially Prisbrey, because of her close proximity to Disney Land), Artists such as Prisbrey see the value of their work as individual, folk-art tourist attractions; they create more creatively, more humanly, than engineers at Disney could. Artists' time, their brainpower, and their ingenuity is more expensive than some corporation like Disney could ever afford.

While many folk roadside attractions exist resist the large systems of American consumerism and capitalism, they are not exempt from the sociological aspects of tourism

[37] "Call to Action: Preserve Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in California." SPACES Archives, 2025. Accessed April 29th, 2025. https://spacesarchives.org/resources/blog/call-to-action-preserve-grandma-prisbreys-bottle-village-in-california/

culture in the United States. Tourism is a post-modern cultural production that aims to represent a locale through a packaged experience.

Chapter 3

Roadside Art in Museums: An Exploration of Changing Contexts

Introduction

Roadside vernacular art encapsulates a unique genre of artistic expression in the United States. Their roadside positions often draw in travelers and tourists, cementing themselves more as stops on a road trip than outdoor museums. When museums remove this art from its original position, it completely shifts the meaning, and this is often done after the artist has passed. This invites larger discussions about the treatment of visionary folk artists in the art world. The placement of roadside art in a museum can complicate its context, discourse, and reception. Since roadside art is especially tied to place and local landscapes, changing the context of the art often inherently changes the meaning.

Background on Museums

While many museums have some amount of folk art within their collections, they rarely focus on folk art as a whole, much less roadside folk art. One of the few museums that does include substantial folk-art collections is the John Kohler Arts Center (JKAC) in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Founded in 1967, the museum has two locations in Sheboygan; one focuses on contemporary art (primarily industrial art) and the other focuses on artist-built environments. In 2021, JKAC opened the Art Preserve, which was designed specifically to house their art-environment collections. They rotate out pieces from the archive to be displayed. They strive to be community-centered, something that many museums struggle with, with artist residencies,

studio, community art projects, classes, and presentations being offered alongside their free museum admissions.[38]

Museums that focus on folk art, such as the John Kohler Art Preserve, are institutions that constitute what is 'aesthetically significant' in the art world, and they contribute to overall discussions of art politics. This chapter will discuss issues with museums and roadside folk art, using examples from the John Kohler Art Preserve and two interviews with one of their curators, Laura Bickford. Bickford is a curator at the John Kohler Art Preserve and has worked at JKMAC for six years. By contextualizing the challenges and debates related to the placement of roadside folk art in museums, I will show the importance of place and landscape in roadside art. This discussion is also important for considering the future of currently operating sites, like Lakenenland.

This paper will examine how museums change and reconfigure the contexts of roadside art. I wondered: how do museums affect and change the meaning of an artist-built environment? Does changing the physical location of an environment transform the meaning? What can other case studies reveal about the potential future of Lakenenland? I will use information about Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park, which has pieces on display at the John Kohler Arts Center, as well as interviews with Tom Lakenen and John Kohler Art Preserve Laura Bickford to better understand the relationship between artist, artist-built environments, and museums.

Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park is one of the more significantly photographed and archived collections in the John Kohler Arts Center. It was crafted between the years of 1948 and 1964 by Fred Smith. Smith was a logger in Phillips, Wisconsin. He lived on his homestead from the age of 17 until he suffered from a stroke at 78; he raised five children with his wife. He built

[38] John Kohler Arts Center. "About Us." JKAC. Accessed Dec 10 2024. https://www.jmkac.org/about-us/

his own home, a tavern, and after he retired from the lumber industry, crafted 237 mixed media concrete sculptures on his property. Smith died in 1976, and shortly after, the John Kohler Arts Center bought the site, preserved it, and gifted it to Price County, Wisconsin in 1978. Scholars state that "The site has changed dramatically since Smith's time, but his artistic legacy is being preserved."[39] The sculpture park exists still exists, which is majorly due to preservation intervention from the John Kohler Arts Center, which has kept 10 pieces from the park, some of which are in storage, and some of which are currently on display [*see figures A1 and A2 in the appendix*].

His work depicted a variety of themes, but they are all a result of his localized understanding of religion, patriotism, the lumber industry, the great Northwoods of Wisconsin, cold winters, and Midwestern folk tales. Lisa Stone states: "Throughout this extensive site Smith depicted history, not as a string of isolated moments, but as an elastic, organic entity in which local and national people, events, and histories were intermingled with animals, all sharing a common landscape."[40] The themes of his art are linked directly to the environment in which he spent his entire life: of his homestead in Philips, Wisconsin.

Fred Smith was no longer alive when his art was placed into the care of the museum. He had no say in its placement, its audience, and its written context. Smith spent 15 years creating his art, almost in isolation; he ignored his work at his tavern and "eroded" his relationship with his family.[41] To Smith, like many other artists of built environments, his

[39] Stone, Lisa. "Wisconsin Concrete Park." SPACES Archive. Accessed December 9 2024. https://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/fred-smiths-concrete-park/
[40] Stone, Lisa. "Wisconsin Concrete Park." SPACES Archive. Accessed December 9 2024. https://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/fred-smiths-concrete-park/
[41] P. 106, Stone, Lisa, Jim Zanzi, and Art Institute of Chicago. School. *Sacred Spaces and Other Places : A Guide to Grottos and Sculptural Environments in the Upper Midwest*. Chicago, IL: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 1993.

art was his life's work. After its placement in the John Kohler Arts Center, the ownership and the meaning of the art has undeniably changed.

Artist-Built Environments in the Wider Art Academy

Artist-built environments have a complicated role within the art world. They are often described as constituting their own category of art, and as Jo Farb Hernández states, "Aesthetic critics and commentators have designated such targeted environmental projects as a separate genre of art since the mid-1970s, describing how many of them developed when academically-trained artists began to challenge the spatial and display constrictions imposed by the visually-neutral 'white cube' of museums and galleries..."[42] Artist-built environments have always been seen as outside the framework of the expectations of academy art, even when they began to gain recognition.

This marginalization of artist-built environments is part of a wider discussion of 'outsider art's' positioning within the context of museums. Scholar Daniel Wojcik defines outsider art as "… outsider art historically has been associated with individuals who have no formal artistic training and exist outside of the dominant art world—psychiatric patients, visionaries and trance mediums, self-taught individualists, recluses, folk eccentrics, social misfits, and assorted others who are isolated or outcast from normative society, by choice or by circumstance."[43] Because, according to the powerful scholarly voices in the art world, 'outsider' art has existed outside of what is properly considered art for so long, it is rarely included in museums, often does not get recognition from collectors, galleries, or scholars, and is not considered 'culturally valuable' to

[42] P. 130-131, Farb Hernández, Jo. "Taking It with You When You Go." *Eikón Imago* 10 (2021): 129–44. doi:10.5209/eiko.74141.
[43] P. 3, Daniel Wojcik. *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016.

society. As influential French artist and theorist Jean Dubuffet states, "It is this museum wall, which one may imagine lined with purple velvet, that may be thought of as the symbol of cultural impregnability... Thus it is that no alternative location of art, no location outside the approved areas of museum, gallery, or so-called 'private collections' assumed to belong to rich connoisseurs, is conceivable."[44] This discussion relates to a Foucauldian analysis of museums; Foucault describes museums as heterotopias; they are intended to represent a comprehensive history of art, thus they have the power of distinguishing cultural importance in society.[45] Most museums, both past and present, often never include what is called 'outsider art,' because of its perceived 'low' status and 'lack of aesthetic quality.' Because outsider art has not received critical attention from the museum space for most of its history, when it *is* placed in museums, it is put in conversation with widely accepted work that has engaged in a complicated centuries-old dialogue of culture, aesthetic importance, and theory; this complicates perceptions of folk art.

Thus, when roadside art does get exhibited in museums, it is placed into a complex web of art theories and discourses. Art historian Leslie Umberger states of the John Kohler Arts Center, "Following the conviction that objects made as elements of a comprehensive whole relate to one another and bolster overall meaning in a way that isolated works do not, the Arts Center strives to maintain and convey the interconnectedness of art created in this specific way…"[46] Roadside art and artist-built environments are often created completely independently, not responding to art critics, not relating to other works, but simply responding to a visionary need to create art. Not only do museums theoretically place this type of physically and

[44] P. 9, Dubuffet, Jean. Towards an Alternative Art. In *Outsider Art*. Ed by Cardinal, Roger. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972.
[45]Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowiec. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. doi:10.2307/464648.
[46] P. 48, Umberger, Leslie, Doss, Erika, and Stone, Lisa (contributor). *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds : Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007.

theoretically in the art world, but they also place them within a dialogue of inter-connectedness that the artists themselves did not relate to and may not necessarily agree with.

Since roadside self-taught art is already on the margins of the art world, moving these pieces to museums further discussions of their aesthetic value. These conversations start with museums considering if roadside art is 'worth' preservation, especially in a museum. Leslie Umberger states that the "The primary criterion for determining whether a site should be preserved is whether it is an exceptional artistic work."[47] The curator has control over what is considered 'exceptional,' and their professional opinion is often fueled by decades of study, work experience, and theoretical frameworks. A lot of roadside art is preserved by museums and organizations simply because of its aesthetic appeal.[48]

As marginalized art is accepted into the mainstream, the context of the art in a critical, theoretical sense is changed, as it is now in dialogue with academy art. Art that is created on the margins of what is 'acceptable' in the academy is further controlled and influenced by museum context and reception. Art critics and curators get to decide whether the art is attractive enough to warrant preservation. Without recognized aesthetical value, roadside art is not likely to get attention from museums; this likely means a site will not be preserved.

Roadside Art in Museums: Changing Contexts

Autonomy:

When roadside art is still in its original location and under the care of its artist, it maintains autonomy. Artists operate often as the sole caretaker of their environments and art, and many prefer it that way. As curator and art conservator Lisa Stone states, "the stewardship of

[47] p. 410, Stone. *Sublime Spaces.*
[48] P. 113, Cathy Dwigans and Ray Wilber, "Survival of Grassroots-Art Environments." In *Backyard Visionaries.*

such environments is generally being managed and conducted by those who, while sharing common preservation challenges and goals, function primarily on a grassroots level, largely in isolation from one another, and often outside of mainstream preservation communities."[49] Once an art piece is transferred from the hands of an artist to a museum, the ownership and autonomy of the piece changes. An artist can no longer work on their pieces as they wish, they cannot sell the pieces, and they cannot completely control how they are viewed.

The sovereignty of an artist's work shifts in a museum context. Museums display art in a somewhat transactional manner. As Jean-Christophe Ammann questions in *Museums by Artists*, "What is this dealing with works which are treated like pictures, with works which are simply offered for sale and which satisfy voyeurism?"[50] While many artists may feel honored when museums buy their work, some feel like art commerce makes their pieces more of an asset than a piece of culture: "Now museums can sell artworks to, for example, endow funds to pay living wages so that their workforces can also be more representative…At stake is having to treat an artwork as an artistic and a financial object simultaneously."[51] When museums acquire art, they can be in charge of its context, its reception, its positioning, and its audience. To a museum, art is a significant financial asset. For self-taught artists, the politics of museums can be additionally restricting, as they are typically less experienced with working with institutions and can have additional emotional stakes in their art.

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[49]Para. 2, Stone, Lisa. "Saving and Preserving Toolbox: The Preservation of Art Environments, An Introduction." SPACES. Accessed November 28th, 2024. https://spacesarchives.org/resources/saving-and-preserving-toolbox/

[50] p. 15 Jean-Christophe Ammann, 'A Few Modest Thoughts on the Prerequisites for Museums and Exhibits of Art, in particular of Contemporary Art, and for Visitors to such Museums and Exhibits', in Museums by Artists, edited by A. A. Bronson and P. Gale, Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983.

[51] p. 57, Whitaker, Amy Clare. *Equity for Artists: Reflections on the Political Economy and Sociology of Ownership*. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London [Thesis], 2021.

I asked Laura Bickford about this concept of art ownership. What makes it additionally difficult in dealing with artist-built environments is the fact that many of these artists come from marginalized communities; they are often of a lower-class working background, are non-white, or they are immigrants. Bickford recognizes the issues that marginalized groups have with ownership but stated that the Kohler Foundation must be in possession of a site and of the art in order to preserve and save it. However, the Art Preserve is unique in that they work with whole collections, often life works of artist, and the museums operate as partners. Bickford told me about the museum's relationship with Dr. Charles Smith. Dr. Smith has worked on making sculptures for two properties over the last forty years; he primarily makes figurines inspired by prominent Black historical figures [*see figure 3.1*]. His work is the largest collection from one artist in the Art Preserve, as they have over 218 pieces from Dr. Smith.

Figure 3.1: An image of Dr. Smith's work; this is just a fragment of his work the museum is currently displaying. Photograph by Linnea Hill.

Bickford said Dr. Smith was initially nervous about his collection being moved, but the museum said: "that it was a contract between us and him that we would be obligated to take care of the work forever. And like that, we were committing to that, and I think that was a huge kind of eye-opening like, really big deal for him that he trusted us to do."[52] The Art Preserve takes the

[52] Interview with Laura Bickford. February 24th, 2025. (00:02:44)

necessary steps to earn the trust of an artist, but this does not erase the potential harm of museum ownership.

Spatial Arrangements:

When dealing with art that is initially so specifically and intentionally arranged in a place, it is often difficult to arrange and display the piece in a museum with respect to its original composition. Many scholars across disciplines are engaged in active dialogue and debate around this issue. As Jay Laurence Platt states in "Fixing Dreams: Preserving America's Folk Art Environments," "folk art environments are so site-specific, as well as so physically rooted, that they do not lend themselves to the museum setting. This does not stop museums from trying to give a sense of the feel and meaning of these sites through photographs, moveable artifacts and even the construction of replicas."[53] While museums can play around with the display of art, they can never truly replicate the original context.

The Art Preserve is aware of this challenging dynamic, but they know they cannot solve the issue entirely. As Bickford states:

> ...Even if we [curators of the Art Preserve] knew everything and like every inch had been photographed and we could, within the museum, do a perfect one-to-one recreation, it would not be it, 'cause it's not where it was, you know. And so. By moving it into the museum, even if it's outside, right? Even if we take a grotto, take up the foundation and put it outside, it is not the original thing, and that's what's so like wild and cool and complicated and beautiful about these places, is that their places, right? So like, how do you take... when you move a place to another place, it's a different thing... But for me, what you're looking at is not the place. Like it's a suggestion of the place. It's like, you know, it's almost like a postcard of the place. It's not the place. The place is gone. It was ruined, you know... And it's not necessarily what was there, but it's what could be or what it feels like or what might be in this really, really exciting way, I think.

[53] p. 24, Platt, Jay Laurence (1996). Fixing Dreams: Preserving America's Folk Art Environments. (Masters Thesis). University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

The Art Preserve views this spatial challenge as a potential for a new space to emerge. They are in charge of an entirely new space and an entirely new dialogue. They place art together that would've never been seen together had the museum not existed. The museum has dedicated the lower floor of their museum to Midwestern artists—those who inspired Ruth DeYoung Kohler to start the collections (and thus the museum). The upper level of the museum is full of artists from around the United States (and one from India).

One significant spatial feature of the Art Preserve is its visitor-facing storage. At any given exhibit, next to the art that is displayed, there are many drawers, racks, and locked boxes that hold the rest of an artist's collection *[see figures 3.2 and 3.3].* Many of the wall-hanging pieces (such as paintings) had a sort of layered rack, where visitors can see that they have many paintings dispersed throughout the racks, though they cannot be opened or browsed through *[figure 3.3].*

Figure 3.2: Visitor-Facing Storage Drawers. Photograph by Linnea Hill

There were displays explaining that the racks and collections get regularly rotated throughout the year. Visitors can visualize not only the art that is currently on display, but also the potential holdings of the museum's collection. This is especially unique for a museum experience; most museums have backroom or underground storage that take up as much space (and often more space) than the collections on display. I found this particularly accessible and open, two things that many museums regularly have issues with.

Often, the Art Preserve holds the life's work of an individual, with can include thousands of pieces. Laura Bickford told me that they rotate out their artist collections often, but even so, it would take years of rotation to see every piece an artist has to offer, as their collections are simply too large. Still, this visitor-facing storage is important; as Bickford states,

Figure 3.3: Visitor-Facing Storage Racks. Photograph by Linnea Hill

> It was really important for us to be able to continue to share the work and show with so many people, so like the idea of building visible storage where we would put all the work, or as much of the work is possible out, as much of the time as possible, was like always sort of in Ruth's mind since we started collecting this work like in earnest in the early 90s.[54]

This visitor-facing storage is an initiative meant to honor the artists and show the true number of pieces that are held within their collections. Their storage shows that everything these artists make is worth preserving, even if it is not currently on display.

Audience:

When a piece is transitioned over to a museum, it also changes the intended audience. While many of roadside artists create pieces with particular audiences in mind, a lot of them also never consider having an audience a possibility; they often create as a hobby, a passion, or as therapy. Often, audiences come with the territory for roadside artists; they are often travelers or people that happen to be driving by. The road was an essential character in Fred Smith's process. He "intentionally built sculptures near the edge of Highway 13 so they would be visible to motorists

[54] Interview with Bickford. (00:04:18).

traveling through Philips, Wisconsin." His audience was oriented around road travelers, which varies greatly from the audiences that museums bring.

Like Smith, road orientation is important to many other artists of built environments. Tom Lakenen also orients toward the road. These artists take pride in their work and want others to see what they have accomplished. Tom almost did not see a point to his art if people on the road could not see his art. He states,

> …the Township hollered at me. They said this stuff is considered a sign in a residential area and it's illegal if you don't move it back where you can't see it from the road, you're going to get a ticket. Well, all right, whatever. So I moved it all into my backyard and I kept building more and building more and. I have like about 50 sculptures in my backyard that nobody could see. You know? It's like, this is stupid, you know, and I didn't really want to sell any if... You know, I mean working construction, if I could keep working enough to survive and keep my sculptures, I just wanted to put them where people could see them.

Tom viewed his art most valuable in a visible position on the roadside. Fred Smith and Tom Lakenen invite community response from roadside visitors with their art, as sort of the driving force behind why they put most of their time into the art.

Audience was very important for Fred Smith in his creation of Wisconsin Concrete Park. Smith was eager to show anyone who cared his work. Not only did Smith want a large audience, but the specific arrangement of his original work was essential for viewing his art "Fred Smith was convinced that his work was important and that it was essential for people not only to see it, but to see it exactly where it was built."[55] Undeniably, a museum is not the venue that Smith envisioned nor strived for. Smith never sold any of the pieces because he liked to see visitors' reactions, and because, quoting Smith himself, "it might spoil it for others."[56] Smith did not want a fragmented audience; he wanted all his pieces to be viewed by anyone in one space, but

[55] P. 122, Stone, *Sacred Spaces.*
[56] P. 122, Stone, *Sacred Spaces*

currently his pieces are separated between the original park, museums, and private collections. His audience has thus transformed significantly.

Museum audiences vary immensely from those of roadside artists. These institutions bring a new type of audience into the mix: people of refined tastes, voyeurs, and critics. Folk art, especially artist-built environments, originally differ greatly from this context; when it is placed in a museum, it is inherently deemed valuable, which commercializes the roadside art. Carl Magnuson states that "in elite art, audience appreciation is often expressed through patronage. When patronage is the primary link between the artist and the audience, the products of expression are transformed into commodities."[57] Additionally, putting roadside art in a museum often puts it behind a paywall; this is not the case with the John Michael Kohler Art Preserve, due to the generous philanthropy of the Kohler Foundation. Laura Bickford told me, "We would close before we charged admission honestly, like being free and accessible is imperative to our mission and the work that we do."[58] Roadside artist-built environments were made for roadside audiences, not museum audiences. People like Fred Smith and Tom Lakenen either make their art for tourists and visitors, or they display their pieces for these people. They want to meet (and interact with) a roadside audience. But, by moving their art inside a museum, these audiences will no longer be reached; their art is no longer tourist-centered, as it was created (or displayed) to be.

Additionally, museums are engaged in a constant, dynamic dialogue with their audiences. As Owen Hopkins states in "Introduction: The Age of Museums", "While almost every museum today is deeply attuned to the needs and desires of visitors – both existing and potential – they

[57] p. 2, Brackman, Barbara, and Cathy Dwigans. *Backyard Visionaries : Grassroots Art in the Midwest*. Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1999.
[58] 00:30:59 Laura Bickford

have to balance being open and accessible with an academic rigor that's grounded in knowledge built up over time through research and study."[59] Museums have to respond to the needs of patrons, of funders, and other institutions, which affects the curation and display of art, while roadside art is most often created independently by a single person.

The John Michael Kohler Art Preserve intends to be a space that is open to all. The Art Preserve strives to be a space in which the artists themselves would be completely comfortable, and it serves a rural community in Eastern Wisconsin. What the Art Preserve is doing is valuable, and they are doing what they can to benefit marginalized artists. They know the issues that they can create, and do the best they can to remedy these issues, but they put the preservation of this art above it a perfect, ideal display.

Landscapes and Space:

When roadside art is put in a museum, the relationship between art and landscape is disrupted. Landscapes are both physical and theoretical realms; they are combinations of space, place, memories, identities, and abstract ideas. Landscapes designate the place-based meaning of roadside art, and roadside art is often tied to specific places. As Lisa Stone explains in *Sublime Spaces & Visionary Worlds: Built Environments of Vernacular Artists*, "Art environments engage real estate and are integrally related to the sites they occupy... exterior and interior works of art fuse with architectural settings and landscapes and are often in continual flux."[60] Roadside art is cemented to its history with space and place.

[59] P. 14, Hopkins, Owen. "Introduction: The age of museums." In The Museum. From its origin to the 21st century, 10-37. London: Frances Lincoln, an imprint of The Quarto Group; 2021
[60] p. 410, Stone, *Sublime Spaces.*

Museums are aware that they are the reason that this contextual shift happens. In discussing artist-built environments in museum spaces, Lisa Stone states that "Maintaining the original location of an environment provides the most meaningful context, yet in many cases and for myriad of reasons, that is not possible."[61] While they intend to maintain landscape-based contexts as best they can, museums often must separate the art from its original conditions.

The spatial arrangement of art is often shifted once placed in a museum. Curators attempt to maintain the same positioning by taking photographs and drawing diagrams, but this is extremely difficult and not always possible. The specific placement of his sculptures was essential to understanding Fred Smith's intended context. In *Sacred Spaces and Other Places: A Guide to Grottos and Sculptural Environments in the Upper Midwest,* Lisa Stone states that "Far from merely decorating his yard, his sculptures, sited intentionally within a familiar terrain, took the form of an ingenious spatial narrative."[62] His work was placed in themes, and the sculptures placed in a way that intended to create a complete vision of Smith's work.

The unification of all pieces is also important to the meaning of the art. The site is "not merely a collection of individual statues, but an installation of sculptures that united diverse concepts and elements into a single, cohesive statement."[63] Fred Smith refused to sell the pieces to any buyer, either as a whole collection or as individual pieces. However, ten pieces are placed into the permanent collection of the John Kohler Arts Center, hundreds of miles away from the rest of the collection, and away from its landscape-based context.

It is also important to mention that the physical state of the art is altered when it is moved into a museum. One significant example is in the movement of Dave Woods's art. Dave Woods

[61] p. 410, Stone, *Sublime Spaces.*
[62] P. 106, Stone, *Sacred Spaces.*
[63] P. 122, Stone, *Sacred Spaces.*

(1885-1974) created an art environment in his front yard, but he did not consider himself an artist.[64] In discussing the movement of Woods's work, Cathy Dwigans and Ray Wilber state, "Members of KGAA [Kansas Grassroots Arts Association] made photographs and diagrams of the site, disassembled it, and moved it to storage. Later, some elements of the environment were included in an exhibition in the garden of the University of Kansas Museum of art… Although the preservation of Wood's work was worthwhile, the elaborate outdoor environment could not be reproduced effectively in a different location."[65] This happens often with the movement of artist-built environments; when roadside art pieces are moved into museums, curators remove and reconfigure out of their original context, and do not always get structured how they were intended to be. This is especially detrimental to the contextual meaning of the art, considering how important specific landscape positionings are. And as the artist is often dead when the art is moved, the artist has no say in how a piece gets moved.

Curating Roadside Art

Most museums do not have a curator that is experienced and knowledgeable about the best practices curating roadside art. Independent curators such as Lisa Stone are attuned to the physical and immaterial needs of displaying this style of art. She believes special knowledge is essential to this preservation work: "Extending the life span of art environments requires a belief in the genre as a wondrous and significant facet of the art of our time, without which the whole of our cultural story cannot be told or understood."[66] A curator must have specialized experience

[64] Grassroots Art Center. "Flying Free—25 Year Exhibit." *Grassrootsart.net.* Accessed May 11th, 2025. https://www.grassrootsart.net/25years-pg8
[65] P. 120, in *Backyard Visionaries.*
[66] p. 415, Stone, *Sublime Spaces.*

and faith in the value of this kind of art. If a museum or curator does not see the value in this art, it risks destruction.

Curators are tasked with grappling with a complicated process. Laura Bickford oversees the curation of many roadside art pieces and ensures that the vision of JKAC is being upheld. She was aware of the changing context that roadside placement in a museum conducts; she said, "In situ, a lot of sites are most characterized by change – the weather, the light, the natural aging of the site and its materials. Museums attempt to arrest all change – to keep an object static and constant…That's not to say that this stasis is all bad, but it is definitely different."[67] Roadside art is inherently controlled by the elements, and preserving the art in a museum is a stagnant act.

Clearly, Bickford and other curators at the John Kohler Arts Center are acutely aware of the changing context. They attempt to maintain the art's meaning as best they can. She said,

> Personally, I take a few different approaches to curating installations or exhibitions of these environments. I try to step back, big picture and think, what about this site is fundamental to understanding it. And then I try to think who, or what, could convey this essential information (another artist, a musician, a scientist). I think a lot about the unknown vs the unknowable, and how to really lean into what can't be definitive, but rather suggested or offered. How can we create different avenues of entry for visitors and keep the magic of discovery, of the unfolding/becoming/revealing of these places. I would also say that I don't take much to be a 'best practice.' I have let artists rename or remake their work, put together exhibitions that are made in the moment – without a checklist or a floorplan in advance, and done a lot of commissioning of artists of all kind to learn from.[68]

Museums like the JKAC attempt to preserve their artists' visions. Curators like Laura Bickford clearly are well-educated in artist-built environment curatorial processes and best practices, but

[67]Laura Bickford, email message to author, December 9, 2024.
[68] Laura Bickford, email message to author, December 9, 2024.

all museums change the context of the art regardless; no museum can perfectly replicate the original conditions.

The museum acknowledges the issues it can cause with some plaques throughout the museum. One plaque addresses the fragmentation of pieces within the museum [*see figure 3.4*]. It reads:

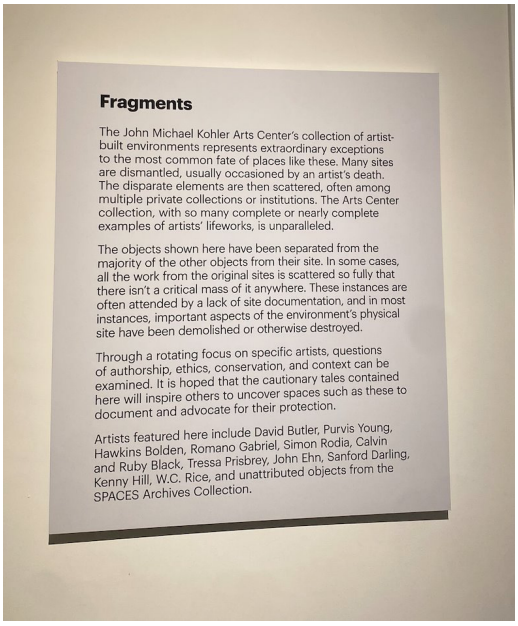

Figure 3.4: Plaque on display. Text to right. Photograph by Linnea Hill

> The John Michael Kohler Arts Center's collection of artist-built environments represents extraordinary exceptions to the most common fate of places like these. Many sites are dismantled, usually occasioned by an artist's death.
> The disparate elements are then scattered, often among multiple private collections or institutions. The Arts Center collection, with so many complete or nearly complete examples of artists' lifeworks, is unparalleled.
> The objects shown here have been separated from the majority of the other objects from their site. In some cases, all the work from the original sites is scattered so fully that there isn't a critical mass of it anywhere. These instances are often attended by a lack of site documentation, and in most instances, important aspects of the environment's physical site have been demolished or otherwise destroyed.
> Through a rotating focus on specific artists, questions of authorship, ethics, conservation, and context can be examined. It is hoped that the cautionary tales contained here will inspire others to uncover spaces such as these to document and advocate for their protection…

This plaque attempts to explain the specifics of issues the museum has in its display. While it is not completely clear on what the museum's role has been in cultivating some of these issues, it is far more transparent than most museums are on issues of ethics and contexts.

Since the John Kohler Arts Center specializes in artist-built environments, Bickford is in a unique position for understanding these pieces. Her experience and education on these pieces inform her curation of the exhibits. Many museums do not specialize in roadside art, artist-built

environments, or even folk art. This also means they understand the marginalization of this type of art in the wider academy. Bickford states,

> I'm really fortunate that at the Arts Center, we have never really talked about these places as 'outside' or apart from the contemporary art world… most of these sites are so much more connected to bigger questions like truth and healing than a lot of other art being made today, because the work was never really meant to talk to other art. It was meant to engage in more everyday conversations and activities and because of that they're so much more expansive and all-consuming.[69]

Clearly, there are good practices established at the JKAC. They understand the curatorial limitations of their work, but they also understand their impact of the museum on art and artists alike.

All of this is not to say that roadside art preservation is a 'bad thing.' Institutions whose primary goal is artist-built environment preservation, such as the John Kohler Arts Center, often do not interfere with the art until the artist has passed and a site is at risk of being destroyed. They also often partner with the families of artists.[70] If the John Kohler Arts Center had not stepped in, these sites likely would have been destroyed. Laura Bickford described it as the last step when other possibilities have been exhausted:

> I would say that in most cases, the best outcome for a site is that it can remain where it was made. For a variety of reasons, that's not always possible, and that's when JMKAC steps in (usually only after all other possibilities have been explored). We can assure artists and their families that once in our collection, the work will be cared for and shared with the public, in as complete a form as we can manage. So that's usually a comfort to invested parties (artists, family, local supporters). And we're constantly experimenting with new ways to talk about ephemerality and change and forever, so nothing has to be the way it starts out.[71]

[69] Laura Bickford, email message to author, December 9, 2024.
[70] p. 410, Stone, *Sublime Spaces.*
[71] Laura Bickford, email message to the author, December 9th 2024.

At the very least, when museums acknowledge the changes they subject roadside art to, they lessen the damage on already marginalized and at-risk artists. Specialized museums such as the John Kohler Arts Center are passionate about their work and do a good job despite their limitations.

Lakenenland:

Exploring these concepts with Lakenenland is essential. I talked with Tom Lakenen and explained the concept of the John Kohler Art Preserve. He shared my thoughts about changing the location and context of the art, stating:

> Yeah, I've never thought about it but absolutely, cause I mean, see all that junk. I got, I got kind of set out in the trees in the woods and stuff and I think if you took something and you brought it into a little fancy building with a bunch of drywall and stuff, it just won't probably look the same, you know? … I've got a couple of kids and three grandkids so, hopefully they'll take care of everything and keep it going after I'm dead and gone.[72]

Tom has worked for years to organize his sculpture park, working within the natural spatial arrangement of red pines on his land. Tom has high hopes that his family will continue the work on his land and the pieces are not moved to a museum. He laughed as he said, "hopefully after I'm dead and gone, my junk all just stays out there at the park and life goes on."[73]

Tom told me he remembers seeing a story on TV about an artist-built environment out in Nebraska, reminiscing on how it changed and did not "look the same when it's then moved into a museum."[74] While he did not mention the specifics, I believe he was referring to Emery Blagdon and His Healing Machine. The JMK Art Preserve has an entire section in the museum for Blagdon's pieces, set-up to look like the original context. When I visited the Art Preserve, I remember this room distinctly, as it was modeled to look like the shed, with similar lighting,

[72] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:02:49.
[73] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:04:35.
[74] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:04:10.

organization, and walls as the original context. I think it is most significant that for artists like Tom Lakenen, this still would not be the same. Location is of utmost important for folk artists.

About an hour and a half after I asked Tom about museums in specific, he texted me a paragraph about his further thoughts:

> Your question about moving art to a different location reminded me of the old Randville bar by Iron Mtn. MI. Old rough sawn pine and log walls turned almost black from years of cigarette smoke along with all the darkened taxidermy mounts hanging on the walls with steel traps and other memorabilia from years ago, just the coolest little place to sit n drink a cold beer. Then one day they built a "new n improved " bar right next door and moved everything into the new place and demolished the old bar. Shiny bright white walls with fluorescent lights made all the really cool old stuff look horrible and ya know, the beer never tasted as good there again either, just thought I'd pass that along, thanks!!

Conclusion:

Roadside art is entrenched in localized contexts and specific landscapes. Perhaps, the art is meant to stay in these areas until a site's eventual destruction. Often, when artist-built environments lose their caretaker, they are destroyed. The art is left to the elements—which can be weather, local regulations, new landowners, thieves, or graffiti artists. Museums like the John Kohler Arts Center intervene in the typical course of artist-built environments, but often for the museum's own benefit. As evidenced above, this is not the ideal situation, but it does mean that an art piece survives longer. The real question is—is this what artists of built environments want? Even if an art environment is to 'survive longer' due to foundations such as the Kohler Family's, is this work wanted? Perhaps, if the same audiences cannot be reached, if the same spatial arrangement is not completed, and if the same natural backdrop is visible, the survival of the art is not worth it. Perhaps, not everything should be preserved.

Whether it is 'ethical' or not to move roadside art from its position is not of concern for this paper. It clearly changes and shifts the context, audience, reception, and ownership of the art,

and that inherently changes its original place-based meaning. Theoretical discussions of changing contexts help situate ‘outsider’ roadside art in a complex web of museology and art history, and more knowledge and training on the subject can help protect marginalized artists.

Understanding the role that the museum plays in the conservation, placement, and future of roadside art and roadside attractions can better situate the value and the potential issues with display. When so many roadside folk artists are inherently anti-institutional, there are issues that can arise putting them in a historically complicated institution such as a museum.

Conclusion

Final Thoughts: The Importance of Folklore, Folk Art, and Tourism

I sought to explore a variety of research questions through Lakenenland, both as a case study and through an exploration of the entanglement of roadside attractions, tourism, and museums. In Chapter 1, I pondered: How do some roadside attractions in the United States explicitly express the political opinions through the art of their creator? Should some roadside attractions be recognized as folk art and their makers folk artists who represent their political individual opinions through art? An exploration of Lakenenland as a roadside attraction and artist-built environment allowed me to see that artists like Tom are *folk* artists because of their creative expressions of cultural influences. Folk artists like Tom create independently to express their political opinions for passersby as a form of political protest.

In Chapter 2, I explored these questions: Does tourism affect the perception of folk art in America? Do tourists view political folk art differently than they view apolitical folk art? Through engaging with Google and Yelp Reviews, travel websites, as well as literature on the sociology of tourism, I was able to show the influence of tourism, as a cultural phenomenon, on folk art environments like Lakenenland. Tourists engage with art under a specific perspective and with certain expectations. While apolitical folk art will often fit their anticipations, political folk art does not.

Finally, Chapter 3 answered these questions: How do museums interfere or support roadside artists' wishes? How do museums disrupt the original contexts of folk artists and how might this be avoided? Through exploring the John Michael Kohler Art Preserve in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and through talking with Laura Bickford, one of their curators, I was able to

understand how folk art is acquired by the museum and presented. I investigated how artists advise (or do not advise) the museum, and how the museums have sometimes gone against the wishes of an artist. Museums disturb the original contexts of folk art through their placement in museums, and while museums *can* (and should) work with artists to ensure that their art is displayed correctly, the contexts and arrangement of the art will always be different after it is placed in a museum.

I have criticized museums within this thesis; this does not mean that I do not like museums, nor does it mean that I do not see their value. The John Michael Kohler Art Preserve (and the Kohler Foundation) is doing great work that can prioritize marginalized art and artists—something that most museums never would do. It is important to recognize and be skeptical of the biases and theories that affect how folk art is treated in the art world. But it is also important to recognize that, without an artist being a caretaker of their own work, a site cannot have the same meaning as when it was originally created. Museums must acknowledge this more extensively.

Some folklore scholars may not officially define what I have proposed in this paper as 'folklore,' mainly because artist-built environments are not passed down by generations. There have been many definitions generated by many scholars; folklore scholar B.A. Botkin states, "In modern society what distinguishes folklore from the rest of culture is the preponderance of the handed-down over the learned element and the prepotency that the popular imagination derives from and gives to custom and tradition."[75] Folklore as a field is variable, as are the definitions of

[75] p. 256, "Definitions of Folklore." *Journal of Folklore Research* 33, no. 3 (1996): 255–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814683.

'folklore' that scholars operate under.[76] For the purposes of this thesis, I define it as variable and vernacular culture. The way that scholars determine and study folklore has changed and has continued to change since its introduction into the academic sphere. Expanding the definitions of what can be studied by folklorists—to things like Lakenenland—is important because it increases the versatility and relevance of an interdisciplinary field.

Lakenenland is an example of folk art and thus folklore. While his art was not passed down by generations, it is vernacular, variable culture that responds to a creative need. The work created by artists of built environment is important, both in the field of folklore and in the field of art history, for understanding the propensity of human nature to create unique and representative art. Lakenenland shows how folk art, tourism, and museums intertwine. Having an interdisciplinary approach to art is essential to understanding folk art comprehensively.

I think it is also increasingly important to consider tourism (and leisure) in conversations about folklore; this is especially important when studying artist-built environments. While many scholars study the artists and the art of built environments extensively, not every scholar is considering the visitor experience of the art. Many of these artists build their environments with special consideration for visitors and tourists; they want to reach as many people as possible, get much attention from passersby, and they position themselves often by roads to make this possible. The art is created as both road- and people-oriented. Without considering these circumstances, folklorists cannot offer a holistic vision of folk artist-built environments.

[76] For further reading, see "Definitions of Folklore." *Journal of Folklore Research* 33, no. 3 (1996): 255–64. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814683, Paredes, Américo, and Richard Bauman. *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore.* Austin: Published for the American Folklore Society by the University of Texas Press, 1972, Bronner, Simon J. "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice." *Cultural Analysis* 15, no. 1 (2016): 6-.

It is critical important for museums to consider their effect on folk artists. Folk artists are often marginalized in museum settings, as they are treated differently from academically trained artists; they often lack the necessary lived and taught experience to navigate issues of payment, ownership, and authority over their art and its display. Museum studies as a field needs to explore these issues more to ensure the ethical treatment of folk artists in museum spaces and theoretical conversations.

There is additional need for the museum, tourism, and folklore field to study roadside attractions under an interdisciplinary lens. Considering all of these fields together can offer a comprehensive look into why folk artist create, how visitors interact with the art, and how the art is displayed. Research on this topic can be used for improving the ethical treatment of folk artists and their art, as well as raise awareness for the value of this form of creativity. More research on this topic can add additional context and arguments through case studies.

Tom Lakenen is not done with his work. The world is changing, and the current political atmosphere is threatening the livelihood of Americans. Tom has plans to make more sculptures about the Trump administration. While chuckling, he said, "Well, I've had several ideas, but I try to keep the park where it's open to families. A lot of my ideas wouldn't make it in a family park."[77]

The American roadside is a vessel that communicates all aspects of a uniquely American identity. Lakenenland is a case study of that—and of political folk protest, through a seemingly simple roadside attraction. The United States is so exceptionally road-centered that every component of our culture can be experienced on the road or roadside. By combining sociological theories of tourism, folklore theory, art history, and museology, one can began to get a look into

[77] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, May 2025, timestamp 00:08:06.

the creative strengths of individual protest. Considering both the content of folk art-environments, as well as concepts such as tourism and museums and their effect on the art, helps scholars to identify the cultural importance of folk art in the United States. In increasingly polarized political times, artists like Tom are notable for understanding the importance of each citizen's voice. Tom Lakenen takes a stance against greed, as he says, "You look at the bottom line, I mean, what's the problem here? It's usually a big greedy, you know, somebody at the top that's, you know, lining in their pocket and screwing everybody along the way."[78] At the end of the day, Tom Lakenen wants a public-facing sculpture garden representing his own opinions. His mantra is, "I'm going to make it however, I want and people can look at it and if they like it, good, and if they don't, that's fine too."[79]

[78] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:26:16
[79] Tom Lakenen, in discussion with the author, July 2024, timestamp 00:40:27

APPENDIX FOR CHAPTER III

Figure A1: An image of Fred Smith's sculptures on his original property. Photographed by Jim Legault, published on SPACES Archive: https://spacesarchives.org/explore/search-the-online-collection/fred-smiths-concrete-park/gallery?start=144

Figure A2: An Image of Fred Smith's work displayed at the John Kohler Arts Center. From https://www.jmkac.org/exhibition/its-gotta-be-in-ya-fred-smith-ruth-kohler/

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