



-CultureWork Home -

Wendy Miller

[Sample Slide Show of Core Sample Works](#) (opens in a pop-up window and requires Flash Player ([Flash download here](#)))

INTRODUCTION

In *The Oregonian*, journalist David Row (2006) acknowledged:

For the past several years, the Portland art world has been bustling with newly arrived creative talent from across the nation, artists and creative types who have turned an already unclassifiable art scene into an even more idiosyncratic one. But this infusion of pining, ambitious artists has unearthed one of the city's fault lines: the dearth of serious galleries and exhibition opportunities (p. 1).

Row proposed that, in 2003, the artist-initiated *Core Sample* was an event that revealed "Portland's new depths of artistic activity"(Row, p. 1). He continued to describe the present-day Portland as "a city so rich with (do-it-

yourself) stories that the term DIY has become a cliché" (p. 3).

I agree with Row's assessment. Since becoming familiar with the term (1)"DIY"—rather than a signifier of an underground culture, or actions going against the grain of social norms and customs—I interpret its present-day meaning to reflect a more widespread cultural movement that upholds the politics and aesthetics of the original DIY notion and includes community building as one of its ideals. It's interesting to recognize how the growth of DIY culture is influencing arts management practices, or perhaps summoning its attention.

More specifically, I ask my peers in the field of arts management: How can we adapt our administrative practices, articulate lobbying efforts on behalf of healthier arts communities and more effectively fund arts initiatives in ways that acknowledge, support and celebrate the proactivism inherent in DIY culture?

CORE SAMPLE

I learned about the concept behind the *Core Sample* project soon after budget cuts at the non-profit arts council (where I had worked for five years) resulted in my layoff in the summer of 2003. My first reaction about Core Sample was profound joy that a show of unprecedented scale and rigor was in the works to honor many of my favorite Portland artists, several of whom had become friends and colleagues over the years. The next reaction was humble gratitude when one of the key artists and curators involved asked for my leadership to oversee the management of the project. Flush with time, the temporary reality of unemployment checks, and overflowing with motivation to help this project to succeed, I was formally introduced to Randy Gragg (2) along with Matthew Stadler (3) and Terri Hopkins (4) had conjured the idea for *Core Sample*.

Earlier that year, news had spread that a large-scale West Coast survey of contemporary art was being planned which would be curated jointly by museums in San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, and Vancouver (British Columbia). Dubbed

Baja to Vancouver, it appeared that planning for the exhibition was nearly complete and had neglected to include any Portland artists. Gragg was disappointed that the vitality and relevance of Portland's art community was being ignored. He wondered what could be done to attract some of the energy that was about to focus on the West Coast, in light of the fact that nearby Seattle would be hosting the major traveling exhibition. After a series of informal meetings with several Portland artists, the concept of *Core Sample* was loosely formed. Gragg, Stadler and Hopkins essentially "curated the curators," who in turn invited a few more artists and curators, and soon an "exhibition of exhibitions" was in the works. Meanwhile, Gragg managed to secure \$18,000 from private donors so that an exhibition catalog could be produced. He and Stadler tapped into their pool of peers to enlist several esteemed critics and curators from outside Portland to write essays for the catalog. One of many motivating elements to the participating artists was that Lawrence Rinder—at that time Curator of Contemporary Art at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City—had agreed to visit Portland's *Core Sample* and, most notably, write the concluding catalog essay.

At our first meeting, Gragg shared his anxiety. He stated that he was on the verge of "pulling the plug" on the project because he had no idea how it was going to logistically come together, much less in a professional manner. Now that a "buzz" had been created and an audience was building, he was nervous that the concept might not carry through to the end result, and that it was in danger of coming off as sloppy or poorly managed. As a former artist and a practicing critic, Gragg was quite knowledgeable of concept, content, history and quality. But *Core Sample* had grown to a rather ambitious scale and he doubted his production abilities. Given that many eyes were now on the project, he feared it could fall on its face and negatively affect Portland's artists if it didn't come off well. By the end of that long first meeting, I had volunteered to become production manager of *Core Sample*. As we parted, Gragg simultaneously sighed and nervously avowed, "I guess the rubber has finally hit the road!" Indeed. The project was set to debut in six weeks and there was no

turning back.



Untitled (Elephant) (2003)
Charm Bracelet (Brad Adkins & Christopher Buckingham)
Clear vinyl, thread, paper, with Libby Beaman and Jeannine Haynes
60" x 40" x 42.5"
Photo credit and courtesy: Basil Childers

The project had spawned an amazing unity amongst local artists; a shared sense of purpose, optimism and anticipation to a degree that I had not yet witnessed

since moving to Portland in 1997. The artists were working, perhaps harder than ever, to mount a series of engaging shows that would open October 11, 2003, the same weekend as the *Baja to Vancouver* debut in Seattle (5). In addition, marketing and production were well underway, materials and tools secured, operational logistics stabilized, events staged, didactic and way-finding tools created, plans set for documentation, and an increasingly expanding eager audience. The exposure and opportunity for critical dialogue promised to be huge.

Before it was over, *Core Sample* showcased the works of more than 160 local artists. Spanning a ten-day period rife with performances, film screenings, installations, and roving public art, there were twenty-seven exhibitions at thirteen sites to which thousands of people flocked. Participating artists received the critical dialogue about their work that

they craved. Articles, previews and reviews appeared in all of Portland's daily and weekly newspapers, as well as *NY Arts Magazine*, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, *Artweek*, and *The Organ Review of Arts*. Many of the pieces in the exhibitions sold. Several of the borrowed itinerant spaces became attractive on the marketplace and are now leased, such as the Nemo Design collective that currently inhabits the space that was dubbed Belmont Factory.

Gragg and Stadler summarized in the *Core Sample* (2004) catalog introduction:

Core Sample provided the pleasures of permanent arts institutions—coherence, visibility, excellence—without incurring many of the expenses and obligations such institutions entail. This catalog documents *Core Sample's* methods and results. It serves as both a practical guide to the mobilization of noninstitutional cultures and a reflection on the worth of such projects (p. 1).

After excitedly reading the document cover-to-cover when it was hot off the press—nearly a year after the historic project had occurred—I was once again completely in awe of the depth and quality of the artists' work that was produced for *Core Sample*. With the bulk of the 423-page catalog consisting of high-quality color plates and intelligently written critical essays, it provides a stunning professional

documentation of the work, and makes the scope of the project evident. However, as production manager of *Core Sample*, and well aware of the true experiment in arts administration that this endeavor entailed, I was disappointed by the editors' claims that the catalog "serves as a practical guide," and that it documents the project's "methods and results." The catalog failed to include any details of how *Core Sample* was managed. If interpreted too literally as a handbook, one is left to wonder if the project came together due to a large dose of DIY magic.

This was a massive artist-initiated effort. Behind the scenes was a small stable of steady and tireless volunteers, alongside many supporters who were willing to donate space, lumber, tools, labor, signage, mechanical equipment, supplies, time and small amounts of cash. To tout the worth of *Core Sample* in contrast to the establishment of arts institutions, while also pointing out that the project incurred little expense, is a misnomer. It further underlines attitudes that allow the contributions of artists to be taken for granted. The in-kind expenses of *Core Sample* were huge, albeit undocumented. To not acknowledge their value as significant and essential to the project's realization is a hindrance towards developing new strategies for artists' initiatives to be funded monetarily.



Layer of Location (2003)
Linda K. Johnson and Martin Houston
Site-based performance and installation
Northeast 23rd Avenue and Alberta Street
Dimensions variable
Photo credit and courtesy: Basil Childers

Stabilization is a term regularly used in reference to the financial vulnerability of arts organizations. Yet if individual artists at the foundation are not a financially stable component of the larger picture, the arts community is at-risk of losing its most valuable assets. In and of itself, the *Core Sample* project was certainly not a model for any kind of sustainability. However, it demonstrated a potential that could continue if proper resources were secured.

In hindsight, perhaps the *Core Sample* experiment can lend applied insight, albeit broad, to others involved with independent artist-initiated projects. By sharing these observations and recommendations, my intention is to stimulate a closer examination of how contemporary arts management practices might adapt to invent new methods and strategies of support for artists.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Core Sample* demonstrated the benefits of a temporary organization. If a presenting organization were to invest in portability—movable walls on wheels, versatile and varied lighting sources, sound and projection equipment, vinyl cutters and other installation tools, and also important details such as liability, property insurance and artist fees—such an agile organization could be opportunistic in the best sense of the word. It is a model that promotes resourcefulness with few overhead costs, and works within the natural transitions of underutilized buildings inherent in any developing or renovating community. Developers benefit from the attention brought to their site of future development—perhaps even future buyers or renters—while also philanthropically supporting their arts community. In turn, artists have access to free space to mount exhibitions, stage performances, or create site-specific installations. It is a symbiotic relationship that helps a community to be vital and awake artistically.
- *Core Sample's* success was largely due to the strength of the participants' relationships—to each other and to their community of supporters. The power of

relationships to combine efforts, resources, intention and support is powerful. It also produces the positive results of joined advocacy and marketing efforts, merged audiences and the acknowledgement (or even celebration) of the interdependence within a collaborative art community. Partnerships amongst presenters in the Portland's arts community continue to build. A bold recent example is Portland Art Focus; comprised of museums, galleries, an art fair, a contemporary arts festival and art colleges. The participants have pooled together funds and managerial resources and, with support from the Portland Oregon Visitor's Association, are collectively promoting their visual arts programming on an international level.

- *Core Sample* was a great example of how voluntarily given merit-based awards would be one inspiring method for public funding to honor and support artists, rather than distract them from their practice via the rigorous, and often ill-timed, grants process. Artists who are deemed active professional leaders could be entrusted with funds on an annual basis for which they do not have to bureaucratically apply or account for. Funding would be simply granted in recognition of talent and demonstrated dedication to one's practice. This approach addresses one common disconnect: the large amount of time and overhead that is spent by granting agencies on the administration of grants processes. Those resources of time, expertise and genuine support of artists could instead be channeled into more research about artists and their work and action being taken to strengthen the other resources that artists need (affordable space to live and work, professional development opportunities, advocacy on their behalf as it relates to arts funding and cultural policy, and opportunities for exposure and critical dialogue about their work). In the case of *Core Sample*, the swell of combined purpose happened over a series of a few months. The project required continuous and immediate action to take advantage of the circumstances that had initially inspired it. The process of pursuing grant money doesn't typically, if ever, align to support a project that pursues this kind of synergistic timeline. How might granting programs

adapt in order to support important short-term efforts? How can projects that do not fall within grant cycle timelines qualify for funding? Perhaps grants could be awarded from a contingency fund at the discretion of a funding agency that sees obvious benefit and merit of a project.

- *Core Sample* was one of the most fulfilling professional projects I have ever worked on, and I advocate that the field promote the value of independent arts managers working in communities. Evolving and thriving arts communities need progressive independent arts managers who have positive and communicative relationships with artists, and can move nimbly with the times in effort to help artist-initiated projects manifest. I find the notion of "arts midwife" a very apt description when considering this type of role in an art community. There is valuable professional practice that an arts manager can bring to artist initiatives, not to mention the increased morale and strengthened purpose or validation that such support brings to an artist on a personal level and in their relationship to their own work. Depending on the individual goals and authentic needs of each project, that may involve: curatorial leadership, critical dialogue about a project, community outreach and education, grant writing, private fundraising, promotion, public and media relations, documentation, event management, volunteer coordination, exhibition design, build out, installation, multimedia production, and/or project oversight that handles or delegates many of the above-listed components. Nourishment, advice, good jokes and encouragement are helpful too.

Visioning a new arts economy—one that acknowledges the integral role of the artist in a community that aims to attract and/or retain a "creative class"—a city might consider investing in arts managers to help support artist-initiated projects, I foresee bold action that a city government and/or private developer could take to that end. By integrating independent arts managers (who are equipped with sufficient budgets to pay artists and cover production expenses) into private development

projects, urban design planning, neighborhood associations, business districts and city bureau activities—the ongoing output and vitality of a creative community could be reflected in ways that directly support the artists involved and recognize the value of the artistic process without subjugating it to bureaucratic process.

Twelve years ago, McDaniel and Thorn (1994) shared these words of wisdom with which I would like to close this essay. Their direction and insight is relevant to the queries I have posed in regard to what can be learned from the authenticity of the artistic process as it relates to arts management practices, systems of funding and a thriving community. In contemplating the current ecosystem of the art world, I respectfully find their notion equally as sage when the words "arts community" are interchanged for their use of the term "organization":

An (arts community) is successful because of the artistic work and programs it produces, presents or exhibits. Each group of artists has its own distinct process for creating work, and this process should be used as the operating paradigm for everything in the (arts community) (p. 13).



Guise (2003)
Bill Will
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Photo credit and courtesy: Basil Childers

1. Note: The first time I ever heard the phrase DIY was when I came upon Peter Gabriel's album *Scratch* in the early 1980s.

*D.I.Y., D.I.Y., D.I.Y., D.I.Y.,
Don't tell me what I will do 'cos I won't
Don't tell me to believe in you, 'cos I don't*

*Everyone want to be what he not, what he not
Nobody happy with what he got, what he got
Hey! D.I.Y., Do It Yourself,
D.I.Y., Do It Yourself*

*D.I.Y., Do It Yourself
D.I.Y., Do it Yourself
When things get so big I don't trust them at all
You want some control - you've got to keep it small*

Gabriel, Peter. (1978). *D.I.Y. On Scratch*. Los Angeles: Geffen Records.

The term was synonymous with the punk rock subculture emerging in the United States at the time. Ryan Moore (2004), musician and scholar, wrote an interesting essay considering the evolution of the DIY movement.

2. The architecture and urban design critic for *The Oregonian*.

3. A novelist and literary editor and co-founder of Clear Cut Press.

4. The director and curator of Marylhurst University's Art Gym

5. The *Baja to Vancouver* Seattle exhibition ended up featuring four Portland artists amidst the 33 total. When some of the shows curators heard about the activity coming together in Portland, a few trips were made to Portland for studio visits resulting in artists being selected.

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WEB SITES (note: these links will open in a new browser window/tab)

www.coresample.info

www.clearcutpress.com/books_04core.html

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