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"Carpe diem, carpe manana."

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The Front Porch

Art, and the Art of Community Making

by Peter Anger

Rebuilding America's front porch — bringing art and artists out of the rarified artworld into America's everyday view, and building community at the same time.

Much of what we do as individual artists is in isolation, so we rarely have the opportunity to work together. Because of this, we frequently have a low-level visibility in the community where we do our work. This has always been an issue for me. While I am an individual artist, I am also a commercial businessperson and realize how little contact there is between artists, the art they create, and the general public. For the last 10 years, I have been frustrated with this separation of the arts from the day-to-day lives of the citizens who live in the same communities. Twenty years ago, I started doing some things to try and overcome this separation. But I have always had difficulty explaining to people why I thought art was so important.

I have been aware of this frustration for some time, but it wasn't until I came across a book published in 1997 that I found the vocabulary to talk about what bothered me and what I thought needed to be done. The book is called *Rebuilding the Front Porch of America: Essays on the Art of Community Making*, by Patrick Overton. What I discovered from reading this book was that while I didn't have any specific plans for what I was trying to do and where I was going with it, I was very intentional in getting there.

As if the discovery of this book wasn't enough, to my amazement I soon discovered that the author, Patrick Overton (www.patrickoverton.com), not only understands my community of Columbia, Missouri, he actually lives here. Overton is an Associate Professor of Communication and Cultural Studies at Columbia College, less than a mile

from my house. Now if that isn't a serendipitous coincidence, I don't know what is. Because of this, I have had the wonderful opportunity of interacting with an individual who has helped me understand my own work.

In his book, Overton expresses his belief that art provides an opportunity for all of us to rebuild the front porches of our communities (large or small, rural or urban). He describes this new front porch as a powerful metaphor to discuss how this nation can once again make community like we used to make community — by being together, by sharing, and most important of all, by communicating with each other, as human beings ... be it at the concert hall, the arts center, the school auditorium, the town square or park, an old restored theatre, a church sanctuary, or in our homes. The new front porch must be a place where we can communicate unconditionally with each other. Community arts development can help us create a common ground where we can all be together.

I know very few artists who are not driven by passion for their work. I also know very few artists who are really good at describing or defining this passion to someone else. They let their work, their art, speak for itself. And this is as it should be. But, unfortunately, art continues to be "roped off" from most of the day-to-day lives of the people in our communities. Yes, people can visit galleries and artists' studios and art museums, but this is a small percentage of the art that is being created and it is usually a particular kind of art that is being promoted. And it doesn't always promote the interaction between the public and the artists who create the

work they are seeing. What we have not done successfully in our communities is to provide a place where art, the artists, and the citizens of a community can connect with each other, interact with each other, on a day-to-day basis. By this, I mean the average citizen being with the average artist — meeting each other, even if only by the artwork that is created. I discovered this was what I had been trying to accomplish all along.

In the early 1990s, I was given the opportunity to hang an exhibit of art at a very nice small cafe here in Columbia. I thought this was an excellent way to introduce art and artists to people in an environment that didn't require them to be quiet or reverential. And it worked.

In fact, it was so successful, at one time I had five public places where I was coordinating and rotating works of art by various Columbia artists. What was even more amazing was that businesses began to realize that art was good for business. Now, Columbia has several groups of artists showing diverse art in diverse places. This, combined with various reception and show-opening opportunities, creates an environment where individual artists and community citizens can interact with each other.

Combining the work of individual artists with the public spaces (mostly individual businesses) provides an opportunity for people to see art differently. In fact, what it really does is provide an opportunity for people to understand art differently. They begin to understand that art is part of the "cultural landscape" of their community. They begin to understand that art is much more, a "noun," a thing to be bought and sold. They begin to discover that art is also a "verb," an action that

can contribute to their community in many different ways. As I read *Rebuilding the Front Porch of America*, I began to understand that what I was doing was more than promoting art and artists, I was helping individual artists and their art participate in the process of what Overton describes as "the art of making community." He describes this process in the introduction to his book:

"Where do the arts fit in this picture of communities in change and transition? Everywhere. Because of the work of community arts development, the arts have increasingly become part of the daily life of citizens who live in these communities. The arts invite us to tell our stories and listen to the stories of those around us. Community arts bring people of all ages, genders, races, religions, and economics together for the common good of sharing and celebrating who we are as individuals and as communities. This is what we are about when we do community arts development. We help people make art. And, in the process, we help people make community. Without really knowing it, community arts development has always been about the important work of rebuilding the front porch of America."

Eureka! This is what I had been doing all along. This is what I was trying to accomplish. I just hadn't found the words to describe it until I read that book. I discovered that I was not only doing my own art, but I had also committed myself to using the art of other people to help make community. I not only gained a new vocabulary for discussing what I believed to be true, I found a new commitment and energy to expand my efforts to do more.

Five years ago I got just such an opportunity. I had been so successful in these "Community Space Gallery Exhibits" that I decided to take my efforts one step further (Overton would call this "enlarging the porch"). I accepted an offer from one of the biggest banks in town to start a juried photography show for that bank. We titled this show "Visions" and it has become a regular part of the Columbia Festival of the Arts held every fall. It

offers more than \$1,000 in prizes to the artists and there is no charge for entering. Plus, the First National Bank of Columbia gets a lot of support and now buys more local art thanks to the bank's president, Mark Landrum, and his vision for a much-needed photography and digital show during the festival.

The book didn't change my understanding of my role as an artist or, for that matter, my understanding of the role of my art. What it did do was give me a framework for explaining this to other people — a sort of vocabulary that bridged the world of art and the world of average citizens.

It was a way to discuss art without the "cultural code" that so often makes people feel uncomfortable because they don't know the code and they don't know the key words to break the code.

In fact, what I have discovered is that most people, when given the opportunity (and the vocabulary), are quite sophisticated about their ideas not only of art, but the ideas expressed by art. They just need the invitation. I think of what I do in the community setting as providing the environment for that to happen. I have always been very frustrated with this.

I now coordinate one very nice business exhibition at the Buttonwood Business Center, a corporate space that offers the opportunity to hang about 40-50 works for six months. This is a high-rise office center, home to about 52 businesses' offices with a central secretarial staff. Hundreds of people go through the center every day. So, I not only have the opportunity to interact with the individual artists whose work I curate into the exhibits, I also have the opportunity to interact with the business people and their clients.

Originally, I started this work as a way to promote the work of individual artists, myself included. But I soon learned that what I was doing was much more than that. The last 20 years in Columbia doing this work have been interesting and challenging. I wish I could say it was easy, but it wasn't. I had just as much "hesitation and hedging" from individual artists as the business people with whom I was working.

There were many times I would get frustrated. There were many times I almost quit and went back to my own "community of art." But once I tasted the incredible diversity and creativity of the art of community-making, I couldn't go back to the isolation of my own studio. I discovered that my own art had changed, having been influenced by my experiences of interaction with other artists and business people.

I make no claim to making any of this happen on my own. What I discovered along the way was that I was very much a part of creating and strengthening the "community of art" that enabled isolated artists to transcend their isolation and interact with the community. In addition, I also experienced the development of the fascinating relationship and collaborative arts experience between a visual artist (me) and a writer (Patrick Overton). But, that is another story.

For now, I am able to revel in the pure joy I have received from working with artists and citizens helping to build a "community front porch" in Columbia. I have discovered that this work has been more than just a community service. What I have accomplished during this community arts development work over the past 20 years, is that what I had been doing all this time was actually participating in the art of community making.

Now I realize that I am more than just an artist — I am a community artist — and what I accomplish doing this art will last far longer and have a deeper, more long-lasting impact than any single work of art I ever create by myself.

I also discovered something else *Rebuilding the Front Porch* helped me understand. I discovered that while I was trying to change the cultural landscape of my community, my work in the community was changing my own cultural "inscape."

And for this, I am deeply grateful.

Peter Anger, a photographer, lives in Columbia, Missouri with his wife, artist Leandra Spangler and their seven cats. Visit his website at www.PeterAnger.com.