

MEETING NOTES -- Putting Arts on the Map in Calumet
Calumet National Heritage Area Feasibility Study - Community Conversation #1
December 12, 2013
Black Box Gallery, Calumet College of Saint Joseph, Whiting, Indiana

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On December 12, 2013, 24 residents and friends of the Calumet region came together to discuss current arts practices in the region and the role that the arts could play in a potential Calumet National Heritage Area. This was the first in a series of community conversations where residents, organizations, and businesses will be asked what a future Heritage Area could be.

The meeting was conducted by staff from The Field Museum, in collaboration with the Calumet Heritage Partnership, and hosted by Walter Skiba, Chair of the Liberal Arts Department and Director of the Media and Fine Arts Program at Calumet College of St. Joseph. It took place in the College's Black Box Gallery which featured sculptures and other art works made by local artists and school groups, some of which were created from found materials.

Upon their arrival, participants were asked to pinpoint their arts practices on a large map, and fill out a corresponding questionnaire with more information about where they create and display their art. After brief introductions, Field Museum staff gave a short presentation about the National Heritage Area program and the process for designation, and answered questions from the group.

Participants then filled out another short questionnaire about how their art is connected to "place" through the meaning or content of their work, the materials they use, and the people or organizations they work with, and the locations they choose to display their art. A full-group discussion followed that highlighted some of the current arts practices that had been indicated on the map and described on the questionnaires, followed by break-out group discussions, and a report back to the full group.

Some initial questions posed regarding the role of the arts in the Calumet region:

- What story does this area tell? How can art help to tell that story?
- What is your vision for the region?
- What connects the region? How do we overcome fractionalization?
- How are landscapes shaped?
- How do we involve "untrained" artists?
- How do we involve diverse ethnic groups?
- How can the arts help to connect to and make visible other regional strengths?

Key points from the discussions:

- The arts have a presence throughout the Calumet region at varying scales, ranging from personal projects to gallery showings to public art.

- Arts practices represented in the region include visual arts, performance, multi-media, photography, literature, and sculpture.
- The lack of visibility of Calumet art/artists was seen as a significant barrier to arts in the area being more successful and reaching larger audiences. The feeling was that the Calumet region isn't seen as an "arts" place.
- The mapping activity and discussion revealed that there are distinctive arts hubs in the region, including South Chicago, Munster, and Michigan City, among others.
- Artists have leveraged the availability of relatively inexpensive, post-industrial and semi-rural spaces that exist in the region to practice their art. The proximity of these spaces to communities allows artists to open these live/work spaces to audiences.
- The region's landscape and heritage are significant sources of artistic inspiration, especially the juxtaposition of nature and industry, putting art in nature, and the region's industrial heritage.
- The "art" category should be broadened to include a wide range of arts which can connect with other community strengths or concerns, such as economic growth and environmental stewardship.
- There is great deal of unrealized potential in the Calumet region, and the arts can help to showcase the region and raise awareness of its assets by linking past, present, and future to "reframe" the region, especially for young people. Examples include combining arts with other community assets and concerns, such as connecting visual and literary arts to create positive, place-based billboards, and capturing stories of retired steel workers through visual media.
- Arts can be used to highlight and build connections across the region, through billboards/and/or signage placed throughout local communities; art can also showcase aspects that were seen as uniting the region, like rivers and slag.
- Arts networks that link artists to each other and to audiences exist throughout the region at different scales and levels of connection. A broad regional network, artandearthtrail.com, has been created for Northern Indiana, but it doesn't extend beyond the Indiana border.
- Competition for resources is an issue in some areas, but doesn't seem to be in others.
- There was a strong feeling among participants that the National Heritage Area program is a good idea for the Calumet region.

Next steps:

- There was a great desire among participants to stay in communication and strengthen the Calumet arts network. A contact list of meeting attendees has been distributed.
- The Field Museum and the Calumet Heritage Partnership are working on a webpage to keep people informed about Calumet Heritage Area efforts.
- The Field Museum and the Calumet Heritage Partnership plan to host a second Arts conversation, and subsequent conversations on a range of topics of interest to Calumet region communities. All are welcome to attend any of the conversations.