

VTArtWorks // August 2016

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# VTArtWorks White Paper

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*Compiled by Devon Johnson, Mi Hung Ryu, Andrea L. Ogier, Kristin Kelly, Evan Merkel, and Bob Leonard*



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## Executive Summary

VTArtWorks, an interdisciplinary team at Virginia Tech focused on serving the field of Community Cultural Development (CCD) through innovative web technology, began working together in the fall of 2015 thanks to a generous grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). From the fall of 2015 to the summer of 2016 the VTArtWorks team has performed original research with the eventual goal of informing development of an online communication platform for the field of CCD.

We have conducted a variety of interviews with field leaders, reviewed pertinent literature, and distributed surveys on current technology use and preferences, through which we have identified field-wide challenges facing CCD in both the long and short term. Beyond the ordinary challenges of practice, the field of CCD faces a few more fundamental challenges. The field is broadly diverse—it attracts practitioners from many different academic, professional, cultural, economic, and social backgrounds. The actual work of the field is at the local, even neighborhood level, rather than through a central location like a university department.<sup>1</sup> This diversity, left un-acknowledged, results in an isolation of its practitioners within siloed professions, as well as along geographic, economic, and cultural lines. In addition, the field includes practitioners with widely varied access to resources, which is especially challenging for passionate new practitioners. Finally, CCD practitioners face the same challenges also facing the arts and humanities in general: shortcomings of conventional documentation processes, which hinder communities from preserving, disseminating, and accessing common knowledge; and commodification of the arts, which artificially separates artists, citizens, and civil society members.

Based on these identified field-wide challenges, we propose general functionality for a web-based communication and documentation platform serving cross-cultural and cross-discipline communication, including features that would enable archive maintenance, integration of many different communities, and communication among the contributors in the field of CCD, as well as specific mechanisms for tagging, automatic metadata generation, recommended content, content visualization, mapping, integration with social media, project profiles, user profiles, and editorial functions.

## About VTArtWorks

### Team Members

The primary investigators and team leaders for the VTArtWorks initiative are Bob Leonard, professor, Virginia Tech School of Performing arts, and Andrea L. Ogier, Associate Director of Data Services, Research & Informatics Division, University Libraries.

In addition to the team leaders, the VTArtWorks team receives advising assistance from Kurt Luther, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science; Quinn Warnick, Senior Director of Academic Innovation and User Experience, Technology-enhanced Learning and Online Strategies (TLOS); Sam Winn, Collections Archivist, University Libraries; and Erv Blythe Vice President Emeritus for Information Technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewee 2.

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VTArtWorks also employed Kristin Kelly, MFA in Arts Leadership 2018 as a VTArtWorks graduate assistant; Mi Hung (Zoey) Ryu, MS Human Factors Engineering and Ergonomics 2017; Devon Johnson, MA Communication 2017, MA Material Culture and Public Humanities 2017; and Evan Merkel, MFA Creative Technologies 2018.

## Description of Research Methods

### Interviews

Our first effort at collecting data focused on identifying common field-wide problems facing current CCD practitioners. Toward this aim, we undertook an extensive interview collection effort and spoke with 22 CCD field leaders. We prepared 5 questions about in-field and out-field communications, field-wide gaps, and documentation process and conducted initial interviews of one to two hours, with an optional follow-up. Data were obtained through comprehensive notetaking and audio recording with the interviewees' permission which were further number coded for confidentiality.

### Marcellus Shale Retreat

In addition to our interviews, we also recruited a test user group who allowed us to monitor their progress as they prepared for a public performance of *Marcellus Shale* by Paul Zimet, artistic director of the Talking Band. Our test group created documentary materials, which they uploaded to a Google Drive folder shared with us, so that we could observe the kinds of documents and materials they felt important to save; in addition we provided them with a simple Google Site to share some information about their work.

### Analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data that we have gathered through the interviews, the survey and the sample test sites, we have built Work Activity Affinity Diagram (WAAD), flow model and several primary and secondary personas in order to better understand the work domain of our interest, CCD, our primary users needs and website requirements. The notes and audio recordings of the interviews were coded to identify the major and minor themes of the issue that we aim to address.

## Results of Research

The interviews with leaders in the field of community cultural development helped guide the formulation of our wireframes and allowed us to produce a guiding ideology and set of goals which will be passed on to the technical platform developers who will drive the development phase of the project.

The most important concept described by our interviewees was a collective commitment to the community and a desire to see community voices and needs reflected in the projects of community cultural developers. What follows are some common themes which proved useful as we planned what our platform might look like and do.

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Through our interviews, survey, and work with the *Marcellus Shale* test group, we have identified a variety of field-wide problems that could be addressed via a communication and archiving platform. Problems consistently cited by our interviewees and observed test users included:

- The significance of community-based work
- Increasing commodification of the arts
- Disciplinary silos both internal and external to the field of CCD
- The failure of traditional documentation methods
- Difficulty finding appropriate funding resources
- Lack of central communication/news source for the field of CCD
- Insufficient training resources and entry portals for the field

The implications of these problem areas are important beyond the VTArtWorks project; these complex issues present some of the most pressing obstacles of arts-based development efforts, and they are therefore important to consider well beyond the context of this project.

### **Significance of Community-Based Work**

What distinguishes the VTArtWorks initiative from other projects (like HowlRound) is its specific focus on community-based work across all art forms and the multi-disciplinary (arts and non-arts) field of CCD. According to one interviewee, CCD moves art beyond entertainment and into people’s everyday lives.<sup>2</sup> This focus on community based work and projects that impact ordinary people’s lives, as described by our interviewees, is the defining frame that guides the VTArtWorks project.

According to our interviewees, any web platform for this field needs to allow for a conversation between artists, professionals, and community members—thereby providing for citizens to have a clear voice in the projects that affect their communities. This concept has been described as a “need for porousness in theater as a way of building community where voices that are receiving the play get repeated back into the play.”<sup>3</sup>

However, this emphasis on community can also lead to isolation in the field as different artists/practitioners become focused on their particular issues and communities. A communication platform can address this problem of isolation by helping to map and connect similar projects, communities, and issues across the country and around the planet.

### **Commodification of the Arts**

A few of our interviews emphasized a larger, field-wide problem that relates to the way Americans interact with the arts.<sup>4</sup> Americans think of art as a commodity instead of as part of the community and a necessary element of the fabric of life. CCD aims to frame art and art-making as a holistic and active force in the community, bringing it out of the museum and integrating it into the everyday life of the community.

In this context, according to one interviewee, “Art making in the Western context is meta-cultural—it is defined in terms of the market as success/failure which leads to a narrow definition of critical success.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewee 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2

<sup>5</sup> Interviewee 2

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In addition, art is all too often defined in terms of entertainment value, decorative value, and investment value rather than in terms of community impact.

## Disciplinary Silos

Stakeholders identified two different kinds of disciplinary silos. The first is the siloing of CCD artists from community organizers, activists, and other community builders (working in public service, city planning, transportation, and many other fields) with a stake in making communities resilient. The second is the siloing of different kinds of art and art makers and CCD workers that occur, for example, within rigid information categories, such as in the original Community Arts Network site (CAN).<sup>6</sup>

This first siloing effect is more profound and more difficult for VTArtWorks to solve. Some stakeholders spoke to the field-wide significance of this problem, while other stakeholders described their desire to reach and communicate with other community workers, like transportation, health, and education officials. According to one interviewee:

*“What we don't have is a place where the various players of CCD can share resources... come together. You go different places to see arts, to see transportation — [what we need is] a place where that could all live under the idea of CCD.*

*We would love to talk to students and teachers in urban planning and development, would love to talk to developers, people who are designing and building infrastructure in cities, rural communities! To talk to supervisors, people who make decisions for community resources, talk to people within finance community! CCD is bigger than the arts [and] conversations are not about the arts”<sup>7</sup>*

With reference to disciplinary siloing, the VTArtWorks team is committed to avoiding rigid categorization systems for our content; we want people to be able to navigate and build their own body of knowledge drawn from many different areas without being held to an explicit hierarchical interpretation of content.

## Failure of Traditional Documentation

In our interviews, we asked stakeholders how they currently document and archive their work; however, “documentation” also refers to something deeper. We are concerned with making content truly engaging for many different audiences; we want to create a useful, accessible, and growing archive, not simply a digital filing cabinet for documents. We have come to understand that documentation problems are more than simply a lack of resources.

We wanted to know how the process of “documentation” can help CCD initiatives engage the audience and connect to community issues. According to one interviewee, we “need to emulate the process of presenting a paper at a conference (presentation followed by critical exchange/questions)” and figure out “how technology can enhance the non-live life of a piece of art.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Community Arts Network was a vibrant community website that was active from 1999-2010. The now-static Community Arts Network can be found via the Internet Archive: <http://wayback.archive-it.org/2077/20100906194747/http://www.communityarts.net/>

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee 4.

<sup>8</sup> Interviewee 1.

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A second interviewee spoke to the failures of traditional documentation as it relates to the communities being documented:

*“[There’s] potential for distortion in the work through traditional documentary processes; in responsible, accountable, equitable processes for documenting, the people being documented ultimately have the power to accept or reject the form of documentation. If your work is being documented, you have a veto over how you’re represented and deserve a partnership with the ways the work is represented—a living process for reflection on the play as time goes forward...*

*What the field needs a way for people to self document, for the field and researchers to have a usable archive and record of history so we don’t reinvent the wheel.”<sup>9</sup>*

Field wide, the problem of documentation is such that, according to a third interviewee, we could do a whole documentation project and it “wouldn’t be wasted.” Many non-profits simply don’t have the time, resources, and personnel to fully document all of their work.

In summary, the problem of documentation has three parts:

1. The problem of “documenting” in a way that captures the ephemeral nature of art and leads to larger conversations
2. The problem of “documenting” with and not just for communities, making sure that communities have voice in how they are represented
3. The field-wide lack of resources for documentation efforts, including a lack of capacity to generate engaging/edited forms documentation

## **Funding-Related Gaps**

When asked about field wide problems, many stakeholders described funding problems. These problems are relevant to the VTArtWorks initiative because we can create a platform that allows for greater national and international visibility of local initiatives, thereby providing information and context for funding efforts, and for building a knowledge base for practitioners and funders alike.

One interviewee addressed the funding structure of the nonprofit world and they way that funding favors certain kinds of projects/communities.

*“The structure of nonprofits is complex and has everybody working on their own ship, there’s not a lot of spaces for partnership...*

*[There’s not a lot of] resources, especially those supporting marginalized communities. It’s a historic issue. It’s the way it’s always worked—solutions are all short lived and are not robust enough to change the dynamics.. [we’re] fusing art, culture, and social change, inequity and distribution of funding to marginalized groups. [But a lot of the funders are] White institutions dealing in European art forms. What are we able to do about it collectively?... Build resistance to statistics, demand that they change.”<sup>10</sup>*

Another interviewee also spoke to this problem, pointing out that when CCD projects apply for funding, they must convince a third party financial organization of the value of their project—not the community

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee 4.

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they intend to benefit. According to a third interviewee, there are also fewer and fewer third parties to reach:

*“There are fewer gates and fewer gate-keepers and it reduces diversity. Consolidating gatekeeping power makes it harder for people to start new stuff, creates a class system in the field where there are groups who have very successfully played in that game, and you have to get cozy to get into the group.”<sup>11</sup>*

Another funding problem is a tendency for projects to receive short bursts of funding, but not long-term investments. A third interviewee addressed this problem saying:

*“We need sustainability around funding and energy/interest [about] how do we keep something going especially in the CCD world? We work in funding structure that looks at immediate results.”<sup>12</sup>*

This interviewee also spoke this gap as well, saying that sometimes funders will agree to give a small amount and “see how it goes” without making a long-term monetary or personal commitment to a community. This system allows artists to engage in CCD work without a lot of training and without a long term commitment to their projects or communities.

In summary, stakeholders identified two funding related gaps: 1) the power that lies with third party funders who tend to favor particular kinds of projects and 2) the focus on short term investments and results.

## **Lack of Central Communication Platform**

In our interviews, we asked stakeholders to describe the consequence of the loss of CAN, commonly described as a gap. According to one interviewee, the “gap is a place where these difficult conversations about standards [and] how we learn from each other can take place.”<sup>13</sup> This interviewee was concerned about the conversation gap left by CAN because he believes it leads to poorly trained workers:

*“One gap is in depth of training. Rather than thinking, ‘Oh we got some artists, let's give them some money and let's see what happens,’ artists need to be prepared to work with the community; talking about a new profession, needs to continue efforts to professionalize arts based development.”<sup>14</sup>*

Another interviewee described the gap as a “gap of beauty—how we share stories and make them beautiful. There’s need for care in BOTH social justice practice and artistic practice.”<sup>15</sup> For him, the gap is deeper than simple conversation—it is a gap in our ability to share work with others in a way that is meaningful and beautiful.

Finally, another interviewee described the gap as a broken connection between artists and others with an interest in community development:

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<sup>11</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee 2.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee 3.

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*“There needs to be a commitment to the rigor of the work to the understanding of the work; there's lots of gaps in nomenclature. if you invite an urban planner to this conversation... performing arts visual arts don't share vocabulary—that silos the work because there's unintentional siloing happening that's about a difference in values.*

*What's needed is an ongoing source for those who are committed to come on and learn from another and not make it focused — we need to hear from people in all disciplines—urban planners, etc—it can't be all art driven. How do we build a common practice across disciplines that is a commitment to rigorous understanding/practice/depth?”<sup>16</sup>*

Finally, many interviewees emphasized that the gap in field-wide communication and coordination is not simply limited to a lack of material. Many existing organizations provide news and other content online; however, these materials are not organized in one place. In addition, while much informal or topical writing exists, according to one interviewee, there is a field wide “lack of critical writing about work.”<sup>17</sup>

In summary, the gap left by CAN is not simply the gap of a “vibrant forum for exchange.” The gap is also a gap in training, a gap in our ability to communicate artistic work, and a gap between artists and other community developers. In addition, a website like CAN was useful to the field not only as a central news hub for field insiders; it was useful as an internet home at which to direct interested students, members of other fields, and the public.

## **Insufficient Training Resources and Entry Portals**

The final major challenge area we identified through our research involved the difficulty of involving new practitioners or interested community members in the field. This problem is due in part to the current lack of central organizing website--a role which the Community Arts Network (CAN) previously filled.<sup>18</sup>

One interviewee described a common situation in which interested students or professionals email him to ask how they might learn more about CCD work or how they might get involved.<sup>19</sup> In lieu of a CAN-like central website, people must piece together the state of the field by independently finding and assembling a variety of relevant books, practitioner websites, and dispersed papers.

This lack of central entry portal to the field also makes it difficult to justify new CCD projects to funders or to community stakeholders. One interviewee described a recent experience in which s/he undertook a CCD project related to regional environmental concerns and found the community's existing environmental activists skeptical of the power of arts-based projects; instead they were attached to traditional forms of political organizing and protest.<sup>20</sup> Another interviewee from the field of urban planning described experiencing similar skepticism when pitching arts-based projects to professionals unfamiliar with this kind of work.<sup>21</sup> In both of these cases, it would have helped to point skeptics to a central website with introductory materials and case-study examples of diverse kinds of CCD work.

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<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 7.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>18</sup> The now-static Community Arts Network can be found via the Internet Archive: <http://wayback.archive-it.org/2077/20100906194747/http://www.communityarts.net/>

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee 12.

<sup>20</sup> Interviewee 16.

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee 14.

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Training resources are important not simply to ensure that CCD practitioners receive training, but to ensure that practitioners receive appropriate training, critically-inclined training. One interviewee articulated an education-related problem wherein students in practicums or other academic settings are disposed to treat communities as lab subjects.<sup>22</sup> This kind of inappropriate or superficial community relationship is something that could be addressed by a public forum and writing that offers critical reflection.

## Implications of Research

### Immediate Challenge: Communication

Immediate challenges facing the field of CCD include the need for a communications and central news website or journal-style publication and friendly, easy access to relevant contemporary and historic work and resources. While organizations like Imagining America do publish relevant journals, there is no source exhibiting the intense community focus that is a fundamental component of CCD. These existing academic journals are also at the mercy of formal publishing structures which continue to rely on a peer review structure that privileges complex academic writing and particular types of content.<sup>23</sup>

Other news-style websites, like HowlRound (a theatre community website developed by Emerson College)<sup>24</sup> and D-Lab (a dance and choreography community website developed by Dance Exchange and Liz Lerman)<sup>25</sup> are similar to what could be created for the field of CCD; however, sites like HowlRound and D-Lab are limited to a specific field of professional practice (as in these cases, theatre or dance), and they often focus on studio endeavors rather than community projects.<sup>26</sup> We hope to fill this gap by providing a communication website that welcomes commentary from artists engaged in diverse kinds of community work, by providing a place for critical, reflective content from community members not constrained by an academic peer-review format, as well as content generated by scholars professionals and other critical thinkers, and by enabling free conversation.

### Immediate Challenge: Connection

Another immediate challenge for the field of CCD is the ongoing struggle to provide meaningful connections within diverse audiences and communities. CCD is fundamentally based in the community. Infrastructure that allows documentable interactions within communities is very important. Audiences for CCD based work will not be treated as passive observers. Instead audiences will be welcomed, involved, and invited to contribute. All contributors will be recognized for the authority of their own experience. The platform will be structured to allow critical feedback from users and visitors, with reasonable protections to ensure constructive exchange.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

### Challenges and Opportunities

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<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 11.

<sup>24</sup> <http://howlround.com/>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.d-lab.org/>

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee 1.

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The broad, long-term challenges facing the field of CCD overlap somewhat with challenges that face the arts as a whole. Notable long-term challenges include the increasing commodification of the arts and difficulty documenting projects in ways that are both accessible and interesting for others. This first challenge is expansive; it is related to the way Western audiences expect to experience art as passive entertainment rather than an opportunity for meaningful engagement, reflection, and critique. This challenge is deeply rooted in the Western formation of an individual's relationship with art and results in experiences with art that are fleeting and consumptive, rather than essentially relevant to social health and civic sustainability. We believe that the field of CCD is ideally positioned to address this challenge through practice, and that the significance of this practice is an argument in favor of developing tools which support CCD work.

The other long-term challenge is documenting work and storing archives in a format that is resilient and durable for the future. This problem is common to many different fields; how can we harness the potential of the Internet to transform our filing cabinets and static records of notes, photographs, receipts, and other materials into dynamic, interactive, interesting living archives? How can cash-strapped CCD practitioners, with limited time, keep track of their work and organize it into formats suitable for the public? How can we make sure that community voices are present in these archives so that future readers and researchers have immediate access to different voices, to different interpretations of work and measures of impact?

## **Reaching a Broad Audience**

By creating a central organizing communication platform for the field of CCD, we also hope to lower the barrier of entry to the field for the public. At present, a layperson interested in CCD might have to piece together the current state of the field and its historical trajectory from dispersed archival and news resources. According to an interviewee, a resource that could function as an access point for those interested in entering the field or bringing CCD projects to their communities is desperately needed — this access point currently does not exist.<sup>27</sup>

While providing an internal communication platform to the field of CCD was our initial goal, we found that the field is interested in expanding conversations about CCD beyond the boundaries of current practitioners. CCD fundamentally seeks engagement with local communities and individuals who care about them. The ensuing platform must enable CCD workers to organize themselves internally, reach their desired audiences, and provide pathways for entering the field.

## **Implications for Repository Development**

Although this research has focused on the needs of practitioners in the field of Community Cultural Development, we believe that this research could also contribute to the larger conversation about development and use of digital repositories in higher education. Our research methodology centers upon an extremely engaged community who has spent the last few years looking for a way to connect; this is in stark contrast to the institutional repository that must work to present the value of its service. As a field, CCD recognizes the inherent value of communication and documentation, but the field lacks the technical infrastructure and strong history of digital archival practices. Libraries in institutions of higher education often have the technical infrastructure to support digital archiving and communication, but lack a truly

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<sup>27</sup> Interviewee 12.

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engaged user base. The VTArtWorks team sees this potential partnership, between CCD and Virginia Tech (in the form of the School of Performing Arts and the University Libraries) as beneficial to both partners. CCD would gain the communication and documentation platform they need to give their work a global context. Virginia Tech would gain an active, passionate, and interdisciplinary field, fully engaged in transforming communities across the globe and documenting and sharing their work.

### **Next Steps: VTArtWorks Web Platform Proposal**

Our research presented a variety of different field-wide challenges that the VTArtWorks team could potentially choose to address. Ideally, the VTArtWorks platform will address both the immediate and long-term problems outlined above, simultaneously providing:

- A central news source for the field
- A journal-style source for the field (e.g. providing critical reflection and careful, long-form writing)
- Software tools for documenting CCD projects
- Archival access to a database of completed CCD projects
- Entry portals for practitioners from outside the CCD field
- Training resources for those interested in CCD
- Information about funding opportunities and strategies
- Networking tools to connect with communities and professionals outside the field
- One-stop shop for CCD research purposes (academics)

However, we recognize that these needs are diverse and complex, and are not possible to address fully in the first iteration of our web platform. As we move through an iterative development process, we will focus on developing features and functionalities (including but not limited to those in the list above) that holistically address the challenges of the CCD community.

### **Acknowledgements**

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