Support within a community

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Support Within a Community

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Nourishing sentiments of excitement and anticipation, I made my journey from my familiar surroundings of the Midwest to attend graduate school at Rochester Institute of Technology. I had been envisioning this move for several months, and I was eager to continue developing my artistic skills in graduate school. When I stepped on campus for the first time, I was surprised to find that the feelings of excitement and anticipation had vanished only to be replaced by nostalgia for the home that was so familiar to me.

Brushing the feeling aside, I attempted to regain comfort in my new environment by organizing various aspects of my new life in Rochester. To my dismay, the feelings of yearning for familiarity lingered. During the next few months, these cravings for the Midwest began to be erased as I met new friends and became more involved with the Metals Department.

Throughout the first year of graduate school, I often thought of that experience, struggling to speculate what facilitated my relief of the feelings of longing for the past and a desire to be involved. I realized that the feelings of nostalgia coincided with my desire for support within my new environment. I began to understand that when I left the Midwest, I uprooted my foundation in the network of support that had developed in high school and undergraduate school. After arriving in the eastern United States, I needed to find support and a sense of belonging in my new circumstances.

During the summer before my final year at Rochester Institute of Technology, I embarked upon the task of developing a topic for my thesis. I wanted to create a thesis topic that was an influential element in the development of my character during graduate school as well as a universal topic that viewers could relate to with ease. I founded my thesis based on my own feelings and need for a community. Just as importantly, I desired
others who viewed my work to be reminded of their inextricable link to support within their own community.

The most successful piece of my first year explored how humans balance upon the lifestyles of their ancestors, *Balance on Our Ancestors*, 2004 (Fig. 1). My brothers and I came from a long line of farmers and cultivators of the land. As we grew up in a country that was becoming increasingly industrialized and focused on technology, we became the first generation to end the tradition of agrarian lifestyle. Even though we chose to deviate from the paths of our ancestors, we still felt a strong connection to the land. I realized that our generation was not commencing a new journey into the modern world; rather, we learned to balance upon the history of our ancestors and merely form a new path from the journey they had begun centuries before.

I wanted to incorporate this concept of balancing our present life with our ancestral heritage into my thesis work by focusing upon the agrarian ways of the past few generations of my ancestors since they immigrated to the United States in 1866. When my ancestors encountered expansive grass prairies as they migrated to the plains of the upper Midwest from Norway and Holland, I imagine that they found comfort in the sublime nature of these sprawling grasslands. I also found a sense of security in the hilly grasslands of Minnesota, where I spent the earliest years of my life. At that time I was too young to understand the meaning of the unique biological structure of the tall grasses or why they grew so close together. A move a thousand miles to the eastern United States nearly twenty years later rekindled my memories of the security that I found in the grass fields of my past. I wanted to include this connection to the land I shared with my ancestors in the creation of the body of my thesis.
With the idea of the inclusion of agriculture in the evolution of my thesis, I strived to create the tangible forms that would be involved in the display of my thesis. I choose to capitalize on the forms I began to develop during my first year at Rochester Institute of Technology. During this year, I became intrigued with the characteristically unique growing nodes of long stem prairie grass. This area, which is responsible for the growth of leaves, is located at the attachment of the leaf to the stem (Fig. 2). This evolutionary trait allows the growth of grasses to be undisturbed by grazing animals that tend to damage other types of plants containing buds of growth cells located at the tips of the branches. I wanted to give the form of the growing node a vital role in the presentation of my thesis, as it is responsible for self-preservation and successful proliferation of the species.

In addition to the location of the growing node, another distinctive trait of long stem prairie grasses is the close proximity in which they coexist. The structural intimacy of a field of long stem grasses allows even the tallest, thinnest, and most fragile plants to survive. Through adaptation and evolution, they have found strength in numbers. Even though a natural field is made up of countless grass stalks, I envision the field as individuals standing together for support. Like humans, grasses are too fragile to stand against the elements by themselves. I aimed to explore this characteristic of dependence in my thesis by creating a field of hundreds of grasses, juxtaposed to a field consisting of a single bent and broken grass. A composition of this manner would allow the viewer to confront the consequences of a world constructed of individualism without harmonization. The overall intention of my thesis was to demonstrate the importance of support within a community.
In order to create a piece that would demonstrate the significance of support within a community, I wanted to keep the overall exhibit uncomplicated and focused by creating an installation of numerous similar forms. I felt that this presentation would establish a stronger message than creating a more traditional multi-piece thesis.

After I became aware of the relevance of the grasses, I researched the structure and type that was common to where I grew up as well as where my ancestors farmed. I believed that accurate representation of the true forms was important in order to bring truth and strength to the presentation of my thesis work. The specific grass I chose to represent is called Foxtail Bristle Grass, or *Setaria Italica* (Fig. 3). This species originated around 4500 BCE in China.\(^1\) It is a highly adaptable plant that can live in varying climates. After populating Eurasia through natural means and trade, the grass found its way to North America in the pockets and trouser cuffs of the settlers and immigrants.\(^2\) Currently, there are thirty-two species in the genera *Setaria*, inhabiting every continent excluding Antarctica. It can be harvested as a crop for human and livestock consumption or left in the fields as forage for animals. Bristle grasses, along with all other genera in the grass family *Poaceae*, evolved as grazing plants. The *Poaceae* grass family consists of grasses ranging in size from ground cover to giant bamboos.\(^3\)

By capitalizing on the essential form of Foxtail Bristle Grass, I was able to employ an exterior form in an interior space (Fig. 4). This organic grass form also allowed me to invest an organic quality into the static metal that makes up the structure of

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1 Foxtail originated in China in 4500 BCE.
2 Migration of Foxtail to US in immigrants pants cuffs.
3 Poaceae grasses range in size from ground cover to giant bamboo.
the plant. Individually, I decided to construct each grass’s stalk out of four graduated sizes of copper tubing and wire ranging from six millimeters in diameter at the bottom section to three millimeters at the top section. The overall height of each grass stalk varies from thirty-six inches to forty-two inches. The entire stalk has a linear texture running parallel with the stalk. I cast the three growing nodes of each plant in a nickel silver alloy to focus attention on their placement, structure, and significant role in growth. These nodes also have the same linear texture and are soldered inline in the middle regions of the lower three sections. A slender sixteen inch long spear-like leaf unfolds in a v-like fashion from around the top of each of the lower three sections, thus delineating the connection of the larger lower section to the one millimeter smaller in diameter adjacent upper section (Fig. 5). The head of the grass is constructed of copper mesh to create a light, tubular organic structure. This semi-transparent head sits atop the final copper stalk section measuring ten inches by three millimeters. The entire process yielded 216 complete stalks of grass that were situated within 37 steel bases.

A viewer that spent hours scrutinizing the overall construction of my thesis would probably not be able to recognize that every step in the construction process had a distinct purpose in my attempt to create the familiar, comforting feelings of support. One of the most obvious ways in which I decided to convey this feeling was to build an entire field of Foxtail Bristle Grass. Each grass symbolizes individuality and survival; the entire field, on the other hand, signifies individuals standing together for support. The countless stalks of grass form a community where strength and support flourish. The massive design of the field complements the overall concept of community.
I emphasized the feebleness of a single stalk, existing on its own, by displaying a single, bent and unassembled stalk of grass that stood in a base located six feet from the edge of the field of grasses (Fig. 6). The fact that the grass was broken and unassembled showed that one individual, existing in solitude cannot survive without a community of support.

Viewing the piece in a large area allows it to engage the viewer from a distance and draw them in. The exhibit compels the viewers to scrutinize the forms for several reasons. The exterior natural form of the grass employs a static material to intrigue those in the interior space of the gallery. I tried to further create an organic, outdoor feeling by placing a one inch thick layer of black wood shavings in the four inch space separating the bases from each other as well as the gallery floor (Fig. 7). I hoped that this layout would enable viewers to become lost in the organic nature of the piece without being influenced by the commonalities of enclosed spaces.

Another intriguing form that draws viewers in is the alertness of the upright and focused heads. I feel that this structure gives the grasses a humanistic quality; the extension of the heads projects the slender stalks upward and visually pulls the stalks vertically away from the floor as if they are aware of their surroundings.

Lastly, the thick and dense mass of the angular, yet softly curved leaves connects the individual grasses and encourages the eye to continually move and scrutinize the entire piece. I believe that these qualities are successful in making the exhibit interactive with the viewer by causing the viewer to move and respond to the intriguing forms that are displayed.
When I was in the process of designing the bases to hold the grasses, my main objective was to allow for the expression of a rolling landscape. This would provide underlying movement below the grasses (Fig. 8). Each base projects the grasses away from the gallery floor and onto the same plane as the viewer in order to present the grasses at an engaging level. This design lent itself to the completion of my objective, however, after considering the number of bases that I would need, I decided to link the bases to the historical Land Survey System. I felt that this would further connect the bases to a historical truth that would continue to develop the concept of community in my piece.

Before the advent of the railroad and later the gravel and paved road, prairie grasses knew only natural boundaries. In time land was claimed and fenced in for grazing or farmland, thus sectioning a natural ecosystem into grids of ownership. The United States began to be sectioned into square townships in 1785 when the Bureau of Land Management implemented the rectangular Public Land Survey System. Townships generally represented six miles by six miles, or 36 square miles. The borders of these townships either follow lines of longitude and latitude or natural topography. My thesis incorporated this ecological configuration of boundaries by allowing a field of grass to be subdivided into square plots. The grasses themselves defy the unnatural confines of their bases as their leaves intermingle through ideological fence lines. The interacting grasses also represent the creation of communities due to the consequence of individuals’ need for survival despite sectioning of land areas.

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4 1785 implementation of Public Land Survey System.
Efficiency and accuracy were very important throughout the entire creation process of 216 grasses contained in 37 bases. The first time the piece was placed in the six by six layout was during the installation; therefore, the final success of the piece did not take place until the conclusion of the creation. Only upon installation, was the true message of a community apparent in my thesis.

Composition, as well as layout and forms, can be a powerful tool used to create a message from the artist to the viewer. Therefore, I chose to use copper and nickel silver for specific reasons. Initially, I selected copper for this project due to my understanding of the material's readily available nature and low cost. Also, copper wire comes in graduated sizes that suit the descending stalk diameter of Foxtail Bristle Grass. The color pallet of copper is warm, inviting and susceptible to heat patina, while the cooler silver color of the nickel silver growing nodes provides contrast and emphasizes potentiality over the other architecture of the grasses. Copper and nickel silver possess an inherent permanence due to their chemical makeup and resistance to corrosion. This idea of permanence allows me to utilize the form of the Foxtail Bristle Grass in a manner uninhibited by time. Although the form of the metal grasses will not change over time, the surface of the metal will continually respond to the different moisture levels of the environment. This ability of the grasses' color to react over time combines with the organic form to instill life in a static material.

Multitudes of communities surround individuals globally. The message of my thesis is to insist that individuals cannot exist on their own; they are dependent on the support from other individuals. For example, a single blade of Foxtail grass will not be able to withstand harsh environments such as wind and rain. In conditions such as these,
a single blade of grass would simply break. Survival would be impossible without the support of other organisms of its kind. In the same way, humans require other individuals for support and proliferation. We form numerous communities based on our beliefs, activities, and interests. Throughout history, communities have encouraged survival of individuals congregating in groups. Subsisting in large groups allows people to specialize in areas in which they have abilities and interests. This interdependency allows the community to become efficient and develop. Strength exists within these communities, and the group is able to accomplish more than one individual could achieve alone.

In light of the postmodernist view, I credit several artists who have been inspirational and thought provoking during the creation of my thesis. Robert Smithson deals with exterior forms in an interior space in his 1968 installation called *A Nonsite* (Fig. 9). In Smithson’s piece, the exterior rock forms are engaged in an interior space by enclosing them inside of trapezoidal boxes. In the presentation of my thesis body of work, I endeavored to create traditionally exterior forms of Foxtail Bristle Grass which thrive in the confinements of the encasement of the gallery walls. The grass forms of my thesis work and the natural rock forms of Smithson’s *A Nonsite* both share an allegorical reference to their original exterior location. This allegorical reference to the exterior origin of each piece acts as the link between the present piece and the original natural forms and ideas, which formed the piece’s inspiration.

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The next art historical association I detected was a piece produced by Agnes Denes, an early pioneer of both the environmental art movement and conceptual art.\(^7\) In *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, Battery Park Landfill, NY 1982, Denes planted and harvested two acres of wheat from the site of a landfill in Manhattan’s financial district (Fig. 10). It marked a reclaiming of land only to one day have the site be built upon again. Agnes chose to use organic, natural forms to construct monumental artwork around the globe.\(^8\) Although my thesis installation is non-organic in composition, I used the innate and natural forms of the grass to create a macrobiotic environment.

During 2004, I studied work by Hans Haacke, a German artist concerned with systems and processes. During 1963 to 1965, Haacke displayed *Condensation Cube*, a plexiglass cube containing a few gallons of distilled water (Fig. 11). The humidity inside of a plexiglass box reacted with the changes in ambient temperature due to the number of viewers that were present in the room. Haacke’s condensation cube is a didactic device still pertinent to understanding contemporary life and conceptual art.\(^9\) I see analogous aspects in my thesis work where the system of change has been reversed. My installation compels the viewers, rather than the artwork, to react in response to the massive assemblage of grasses that have been placed before them.

Perhaps the artist who has been most inspirational in the creation of my thesis work is Fred Wilson. Fred Wilson is an African-American installation artist who explores forgotten ideas and artifacts in museum archives. An example, *Cabinetmaking 1820-1960*, arranges a collection of ornate wooden chairs before a whipping post, which was


\(^{8}\) McEvilley, p. 158-164.

\(^{9}\) www.artnet.com/Magazine/features/cone/cone8-6-9.asp.
reportedly used until 1958 (Fig. 12). The arrangement tells viewers of the countless black victims who experienced the cruciform whipping post and of white people who viewed slavery as customary.\(^{10}\) This shocking display evoked enormous feelings of horror and remembrance to a devastating period in history. Two aspects of Wilson’s work have been extremely influential in my own artistic development. First of all, the vigilant manner in which Wilson uses arrangement and layout of objects to evoke intense reactions from the viewers. In my thesis, I strived to create a powerful, thought provoking environment for the viewers by the strategic placement of the Foxtail Bristle Grass and each of the 37 bases. Secondly, Wilson’s pieces commonly are composed of forgotten or familiar objects. The piece as a whole, however, is anything but ordinary. In my thesis work, I used a familiar form of grasses that is common to many areas of the world, nevertheless, I undertook the endeavor to create an original and contemplative experience for the viewers.

I believe that current events and experiences can gain roles in development of many artist’s work as well as observations of current and historical artwork. One such event that influenced my thesis work was a local Midwestern event of reclamation of the Pig’s Eye Landfill site in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Over several decades, the land area had become highly polluted and concentrated with toxic metals. In 1990, Mel Chin along with Dr. Rufus Chaney began a four-year experiment called \textit{Revival Field} (1990-1993) in which they attempted to detoxify a 600 square foot section of the landfill (Fig. 13). \textit{Revival Field} was the first phytoremediation project where natural plants would be used.

\footnote{Buskirk, Martha. \textit{The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art} (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 163-165.}
to leach out toxins from the polluted soil. Chin’s project called for a rectilinear fence to be constructed around the area to be involved in the experiment. This fence line delineated the regeneration area much like the most common fence line found throughout the farmlands of the Midwest. This event has significance to me as I viewed the installation of my thesis body of work; the form of the square planting of my grasses had the purpose of invoking specific feelings of support found within the assembly of a community. As I thought back to the reclamation of the Pig’s Eye Landfill site in Minnesota, I realized that this same rectilinear fencing of the land could not only section land but connect and help to revitalize it as well.

In addition to the numerous artists who influence the body of work in my thesis, I employ ideas and forms from artwork that I have created in the years previous to my thesis. For example, the successful form of the growing node that I had fashioned in my artwork during my first year of graduate school facilitated the creation of Support Within a Community, 2005. In many pieces that I create, I believe that there are concealed forms and ideas that can be liberated in a successive body of work. In the process of creating Support Within a Community, 2005, I identified several aspects of the body of work that I would like to explore in additional pieces.

The grid system I utilized in my thesis that pertained to the Land Survey System in the United States was an intriguing geometrical means to display a body of work. For me, this configuration created a feeling of intrigue, therefore, I would like to use this geometric formation in future pieces. Furthermore, I aspire to draw more attention to this

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11 www.satorimedia.com/fmraWeb/chin.htm
historical method of sectioning our land by using the rectilinear formation as a main focus point in my post graduate work.

I plan to continue to utilize the form of the Foxtail Bristle Grass in my future work as well. Changing the scale and proportions of the grass form will allow me to adorn the body, thus exploring the idea of support in a tactile connection between the body and the form of the grass. Displaying a large number of these forms around the perimeter of the original installation of 216 grasses is another means in which I can link the form of the grass to the human need of support.

In the initial steps in the process of creating my thesis body of work, I was driven by the desire to incorporate the concept of balancing my present life with my ancestral heritage. I chose to represent this idea in my thesis by focusing on the agrarian lifestyle of my ancestors and recreating the form of expansive grass prairies they encountered while migrating to the plains of the Midwestern United States. It is through the form of the expansive grass prairies, that I was able to explore the temporal dimensions of community.

As philosopher Josiah Royce explains, “A community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts as a part of his own individual life and self the same past events that each of his fellow-members accepts, may be called a community of memory.”

Royce goes on to explain that similarly, “a community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life and self, the same expected future events of expectation or...a community of hope.” These common past and future events, which all members hold as identical parts of their own lives, are the basis of their

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12 Robinson, D.S., p.248
13 Robinson, D.S., p.249
loyalty to the community. Therefore, the incorporation of the form of the expansive prairie grasses serves to symbolize Royce’s definition of communities of memory and hope.

In addition to the creation of a community in my thesis, I constantly strove to incorporate a feeling of support throughout my body of work. Structural support of individual grasses displayed the permanent need for community necessary for survival. This feature of my grasses represents the idea that the quest for support will persevere for all of mankind. As the seventeenth-century English writer John Donne once wrote,

“No man is an Island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the Continent,
a part of the main...”  

This philosophical statement by Donne is an insightful assessment that individuals exist not in isolation of each other; rather, an invisible connection encompasses all of humanity. Donne continues by writing,

“...any man’s death diminishes me, because
I am involved in Mankind; And therefore
never sent to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.”

At the time when Donne made this statement, it was a tradition in the Catholic Church to toll its bell when one of its parishioners died. Donne is suggesting here that no

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14 Donne, John. (1572-1631), *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII*
15 Donne, John. (1572-1631), *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII*
man can exist solely by himself. He states that we are all interconnected, so that when one member of society is lost, it is felt by all humankind. Furthermore, another person’s loss is a loss of our own. Our need for support is shaped by the intricate weaving of the lives of all humankind.

Although it could be assumed that any collection of individuals could be considered a community, I desired to stress in my thesis work that a community can exist only where individual members are in communication with one another so that in some measure, there is a correspondence of feeling, philosophy and emotion. The fact that the leaves of the grasses were allowed to intermingle, move and react to one another between individual grasses showed a communication that existed within the community of grasses. However, the sharing of individual feelings, thoughts and wills that exist in a community should not imply that a loss of identity and individuality is prevalent among its members. Individuals remain individuals, just as you can remove a single stalk from my field of grass. A loss of a single stalk will therefore create an absence that is felt by the remaining community of grasses. Individual life will always exist, but forming a community of individuals creates a higher-order life that extends beyond any individual life.

As American philosopher Royce acknowledges, “My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community.” The notions of personal identity and purpose are also indecipherable unless we surmise a community of individuals that define causes and establish social roles for members of that society to embrace.

16 Royce, J. 1881, Primer of Logical Analysis for the Use of Composition Students.
17 Robinson, D.S., p.249.
Figure 1. Lance Neirby, *Balance on Our Ancestors*, 2004, Copper, Heat Patina. Photo: Lance Neirby.

Figure 2. Image of Grass Growing Node. Adapted from www.missouriplants.com.
Figure 3. *Seteria Italica* or Foxtail Millet Grass, Adapted from photograph by Kitty Kohout for the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point and from scientific drawing by Agnes Chase from Norman C. Fassett's *Grasses of Wisconsin*.

Figure 4. Lance Neirby, *Support Within a Community*, 2005, Copper, Steel, Wood, Paint, Nickel Silver, Brass, Main Plot equals 8’ x 8’ x 52”. Photo: Lance Neirby.
Figure 5. Lance Neirby, *Support Within a Community*, 2005, Copper, Steel, Wood, Paint, Nickel Silver, Brass, Main Plot equals 8’ x 8’ x 52”, Detail of Leaf to Stalk Connection. Photo: Lance Neirby.

Figure 6. Lance Neirby, *Support Within a Community*, 2005, Copper, Steel, Wood, Paint, Nickel Silver, Brass, 27” x 27” x 20”, Detail of Unassembled Grass. Photo: Lance Neirby.
Figure 7. Lance Neirby, *Support Within a Community*, 2005, Copper, Steel, Wood, Paint, Nickel Silver, Brass, Main Plot equals 8’ x 8’ x 52”, Detail of Black Woodshavings Separating Bases from One Another and Gallery Floor. Photo: Lance Neirby.

Figure 8. Lance Neirby, *Support Within a Community*, 2005, Copper, Steel, Wood, Paint, Nickel Silver, Brass, Main Plot equals 8’ x 8’ x 52”, Detail of Rolling Topography of Bases. Photo: Lance Neirby.

Figure 10. Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan*, 1982, Two Acre Plot of Wheat in Lower Manhattan. Adapted from www.marquette.edu.

Figure 13. Mel Chin (with Dr. Rufus Chaney), *Revival Field*, 1990-1993, Chin used plants to absorb toxic metals from polluted soil, Pig’s Eye Landfill, Saint Paul, Minnesota. Adapted from www.greenmuseum.org.

Donne, John. (1572-1631), Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. Meditation XVII


