

# SEVEN DAYS

VERMONT'S INDEPENDENT VOICE

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## Artful Dodger

As a crisis looms in arts funding, Vermont's Lyman Orton takes action

By Matt Scanlon [02.04.09]

In the morning of October 24, 2008, about 50 people filed into the oak and crimson Representatives Hall in the Vermont Statehouse. They'd come to hear from the two men sitting beside the elevated speaker's chair: Lyman Orton, owner of the [Vermont Country Store](#) [1] and founder of the [Orton Family Foundation](#) [2]; and [Alex Aldrich](#) [3], executive director of the [Vermont Arts Council](#) [4]. About 30 legislators settled themselves in the horseshoe-shaped innermost row, while 20 artists took seats behind them.

While the setting was august, no one could have been quite prepared for the frank tone and sweeping import of Aldrich's introductory remarks. "The house of cards that we have come to know as our basic economy is tumbling down around our ears," he began. "All the funding and policy underpinnings that we have constructed to support our Great Society over the past 40 or 50 years are changing, even as we meet today."

Having brought a quick hush to the chamber, Aldrich continued: "This means that whatever you think you know about public funding, or whatever or whoever you know as the leverage points that sustain the arts . . . over the next two or three years will either be gone completely or changed in fundamental ways."

It was a lot of words, but the message was simple: At a time when public funding for necessities such as roads and schools is imperiled, public arts funding could simply cease to exist. When the recession chopping block comes out, programs that enhance people's lives in intangible ways — say, by putting paintings and sculptures in public spaces, or funding the artists toiling in every community — tend to be the first to go.

But that doesn't mean public art has to disappear. Its support just might get a bit more . . . private.

At least, that's the concept behind "[The Art of Action: Shaping Vermont's Future Through Art](#) [5]," the joint brainchild of nonprofit director Aldrich and businessman Orton. At first glance, it appears to be a perfectly standard private grant program. The 20 artists gathered at the Statehouse had been winnowed down from a pool of 300 applicants from across the country. These finalists were competing for 10 spots — each carrying an average commission of \$25,000.

But, rather than giving their respective muses free rein, the competitors had an assignment: Their proposals would address the "critical challenges facing Vermont over the next generation," as Aldrich put it. Using data about Vermonters' hopes and fears gathered by the [Council on Rural Development](#) [6], the finalists would take three months to develop presentations.

That due date has come and gone — a panel of judges reviewed 19 proposals (one candidate dropped out) last week in the Pavilion Building in Montpelier. The 10 winners are being announced this week.

The chosen artists of action will have eight months to complete at least three works that must be two-dimensional, for eminently practical reasons: They'll be making a tour of various state venues. Among

the potential subject matters mentioned on the project's website — and drawn from CRD research — are Vermont's aging work force, dearth of high-tech infrastructure, dependence on the automobile, high energy costs, not-so-universal health care, and endangered environment and character.

Orton is putting up the bucks behind “Art of Action,” making it a return in some respects to the private patronage system that helped the arts flourish in Europe before the rise of state funding. No modern-day, capricious Medici, however, he's working with the VAC to realize his vision — one that remains firmly focused on the state and its future.

Though Orton divides his time between Weston and Colorado, his roots here run deep — he's a seventh-generation Vermonter. His parents founded the Vermont Country Store in 1945 in Weston, and Orton, now 68, has overseen its expansion from a relatively small mail-order and storefront business into a thriving national retailer of apparel, beauty products and food. At least part of that success is due to his smart use of the “Vermont brand” — the pages of the Vermont Country Store catalogue practically exhale old-timey, small-town values, and many of its popular products are retro revivals of brands that haven't been mass-marketed since the days of soda fountains.

An active art collector and philanthropist, Orton created the Orton Family Foundation in 1995 with a mission of “helping small cities and towns articulate, implement and steward their heart and soul assets so that they can adapt to change while enhancing the attributes they value most,” according its website. It has supported programs in Maine, Colorado, Wyoming and Vermont — such as the “[Art & Soul \[7\]](#)” project in Starksboro. “Art of Action,” however, is funded solely by Lyman Orton.

Orton became a collector of Vermont art more than 30 years ago, when he attended auctions with friend and fellow collector Barbara Trask Melhado and saw out-of-state buyers bidding on works by a number of well-known 20th-century Vermont artists. Hoping to keep as much art as possible in the state, Orton began acquiring work by [Rockwell Kent \[8\]](#), [Aldro T. Hibbard \[9\]](#) and others. He amassed a sizable collection, selections from which appeared in a 2006 traveling show entitled “Lost Vermont Images.”

But Orton is no aesthete hoarding masterworks — nor does he think art should be only for the elite. “There's this typical view of artists wearing a beret, feverishly cranking out pieces of art that, typically, very few people get to see and fewer still understand,” says John Zwick, program director for “Art of Action.”

Essex Junction-based Zwick sees the project as a logical extension of Orton's vision — both of Vermont's artistic uniqueness and its small-scale economic sustainability. “Lyman wanted to broadcast that art is a practical asset and that it both defines and invigorates local communities,” he says. “Art is in everything we do . . . in our bridges, interstates, churches and village greens. This is particularly important to convey during difficult economic times, because art funding is always the first thing that gets slashed when things go badly.”

While “Art of Action” is designed to inspire dialogues about future challenges, it has a broader aim: To increase art's share in the marketplace of ideas. This entails making art more “marketable” in every sense. To that end, “Art of Action” participants are encouraged to take an active role in publicizing their work (chiefly through the creation of blogs), something many have never done before. And, after touring the state, the winners' works will be auctioned to raise money to keep the program going.

Before the finalists presented their work in January, *Seven Days* spoke to Orton about his “Art of Action” project and how he views the future of the arts in Vermont, even in a worst-case scenario without state and federal support.

**SEVEN DAYS: What inspired you to create “The Art of Action”?** LYMAN ORTON: There were many

cooks involved, but essentially it was the result of a conversation that I had with Alex [Aldrich]. We were discussing the economic sustainability of small communities in the state — how they would weather the future, etc. — and it occurred to us that there was a way of harnessing the work of the Vermont Arts Council, the Orton Family Foundation and the Vermont Council on Rural Development to create together a project without precedent in the state. We wanted to start a program that would inspire a group of artists to think creatively about the challenges we face: to use painting and other media to broaden the conversation about Vermont's future beyond just the written and spoken word.

**SD: Was your experience as a collector of works by Vermont artists part of the inspiration? LO:**

Absolutely. Many of the pieces of art I've collected were completed in the state during the period from the 1920s to the 1960s. This was a time of enormous change . . . when we reached the nadir of both the Great Depression and an era of depopulation for Vermont. Though they didn't act in unison, necessarily, these artists — such as Aldro T. Hibbard and Rockwell Kent — were describing, through landscapes, portraiture and depictions of everyday town life, what the conditions were at the time . . . good and bad. They traced a timeline of beauty, but also of poverty and, ultimately, recovery. They also did their part, collectively, to recreate a state economy that many considered beyond repair.

**SD: It's not hard to recognize today's parallels . . . LO:** No, it's not. It wouldn't be overstating it to say that we are in the midst of an economic horror. I avoid the temptation to make comparisons to the Great Depression, however, because it's both not helpful and inaccurate. One parallel that holds true to me, however, is that we are faced with recreating the economy of Vermont once again. Alex and I thought that if we could unite a group of today's artists with a broad mission of addressing the challenges we face, an interesting dialogue could result.

**SD: About what . . . and with whom? LO:** That's where the work of the Vermont Council on Rural Development came in. One of its projects is called the Council on the Future of Vermont [10] [CFV], which sponsors teams to go throughout the state and collect stories from citizens regarding issues likely to be of importance to the next generation, and the generation after that. It has produced a huge amount of information concerning what we are getting right, as well as what people are fearful of. We made a DVD of information from the CFV available to the finalists to base their work on.

**SD: What are you expecting as far as final artwork is concerned? LO:** That's the joy of this; I don't know. We gave these 20 people a general framework, but beyond that it is up to them. Sixteen of the finalists are either from Vermont or currently reside here, with Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and Pennsylvania home to the other four, so they all have an idea of the issues facing this part of the country.

But let me give you an older example. In the 1930s, there was a searing debate in Vermont over the proposed Green Mountain Parkway: a highway that was supposed to run along the spine of the Green Mountains. Proponents felt that any opportunity to get tourists into the state would justify the project, but it was ultimately voted down because the majority of people — including my father — weren't willing to support anything that promised to bring people into the state: [They felt] that our mantra could not be “economic development at all costs.” Now, this was radical stuff in the depths of the Great Depression. I can imagine “Art of Action” work addressing updated but similar issues like suburban sprawl, box-store proliferation and overpopulation.

**SD: But can't these issues be discussed just as effectively in meetings . . . through discussion? How are artists particularly poised to generate a debate about the future? LO:** Because you can't take a picture of the future, but you can paint a scenario of the future. We wanted to use the mind of the artist as a way to communicate to Vermonters, and hopefully to draw in more of them than the written or spoken word could. Health care . . . the economy . . . what makes us unique . . . these are pivotal issues, and in discussing them, all 600,000 of us can't show up and weigh in. The hope, though, is that the more people are engaged, the better, and then we will make wiser choices than a dozen legislators sitting in a room

would come up with. As Alex said at October's meeting, artists are the greatest problem solvers because they experience things in a different way and speak in other languages.

**SD: The term "Vermont's brand" came up a few times at the fall meeting. What does it mean?** LO: Several things, really. Ask someone outside of the state what it means, and they are likely to think of hayfields and maple trees and mountains. To my eye, though, every farm and every hayfield has been painted. We need to go deeper than the pastoral in search of what makes us unique. I think it's our creativity. Did you know that there have been more inventions per capita in Vermont than any state in the Union? John Deere, who revolutionized agriculture with his [self-scouring steel] plow, came of age here. The electric motor was invented here. In 1777, Vermont was the first of the states to abolish slavery. We have a history of firsts . . . of innovation. We'd like to reinvigorate that quality.

**SD: Is the hope also to create a new market for artists: to find an alternative to public funding should that disappear?** LO: Well, we all hope that isn't going to happen, but, yes. We want to show that artists and art have a place at the table. A happy consequence of that relevance would be saleability, of course.

**SD: A few of the artists expressed disappointment at October's Montpelier meeting about being limited to two-dimensional artwork. Wouldn't giving them free rein to choose their own media augment inspiration?** LO: Sure, but we also had to make some concessions to practicality. We are going to travel the state with the artists and their pieces in 2010, and hauling a two-ton sculpture around...

**SD: Other artists seemed concerned about their role as promoters of their work. Can you speak to that?** LO: It's true that they have been asked to engage in the promotion and marketing of whatever they produce. I don't mean that they need to be carnival barkers, though. At the moment, what they are being encouraged to do is blog about their progress, both on "[The Art of Action](#)'s blog [11] and on their own blog if at all possible. We have some dire realities to face in this economy, and part of the mission of the program is to help break the artist out of the studio and encourage them to get the word out. Survival of the arts will depend on that, I imagine.

**SD: And there will ultimately be an auction of the work?** LO: Yes. These pieces were never intended to be museum artwork, but to be bought... to show that artistic beauty and relevance has more value than ever. The proceeds will go to the artists as well as to funding the next "Art of Action" program.

**SD: So this isn't a one-off?** LO: Oh, no. I'm happy to fund this first round, but the plan is to make "Art of Action" as self-sustaining as possible.

**SD: There was talk initially of your wanting to keep one work of art from each artist. Are you going to include some "Art of Action" work in your collection?** LO: [Laughs] I suppose the collector in me was tempted, but, no, I'm not going to keep anything unless I get it at auction. If I want a piece, I'm going to have to raise my hand, just like everyone else.

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#### Source URL:

<http://www.7dvt.com/2009artful-dodger>

#### Links:

[1] <http://www.vermontcountrystore.com/Shop>

[2] <http://www.orton.org/>

[3] <http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/Portals/0/tabid/122/Default.aspx>

[4] <http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/>

[5] <http://www.vermontartscouncil.org/Artists/TheArtofAction/tabid/98/Default.aspx>

[6] <http://www.vtrural.org/>

[7] <http://www.orton.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.ViewPage&PageID=729>

[8] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockwell\\_Kent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rockwell_Kent)

[9] <http://www.vosegalleries.com/artists/ArtistWorks.cfm?ArtistID=118>

[10] <http://www.futureofvermont.org/>

[11] <http://www.artofaction.blogspot.com/>