

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Lake wetlands/riparian zone the author hiked in Utah. Photo: Helen De Michiel

OPEN SPACE DOCUMENTARY

By Helen De Michiel

Open space documentary is an emerging framework for community-based media. Intentional participatory media experiments are proliferating across rapidly developing and evolving distribution platforms. New technology and social media have quickly created biodiverse habitats where artists are able to test how media can communicate stories, imagine social change, and function as a dynamically evolving participatory “open space.” Instead of national or global definitions, the open space documentary model frames hyperlocal and community-based media practices as key to bringing people with diverse interests together.

Three examples of media projects exemplify the spirit of open space documentary; they are intentional media arts projects seeking to influence other areas of social change, from local to national. Saving the Sierra is a transmedia regional documentary project of rural responses to urban development pressures. The Precious Places Community History Project is a video-based history of Philadelphia and the surrounding region. Open Minds Open Mouth is an evolving open space documentary project in Berkeley that encourages a social media community to grow around Lunch Love Community; its intentional organizing principle is to set up and encourage ongoing dialogue and connection on a local human scale.

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A METAPHORICAL HABITAT FOR PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

Out on an early morning hike, I fall into an extended rumination about my work in documentary, social change, and community building. Is what I make “film,” or “media,” or an evolving fluid hybrid form yet to be named and connected to a history and lineage?

Passing a large patch of wetlands embracing a reservoir lake, I take a moment to watch a crane glide across the water and touch down among the tangled grass below where the lake meets the land, and each permeates the other in spongy pools of water and mud. I’m on high ground, and I notice a nearby interpretive sign explaining that the area below me, intermingling dry and wet, is a riparian zone—a rich, biodiverse habitat crucial for conserving soil, supporting wildlife and birds, and filtering or cleaning out environmental toxins.

The riparian zone is a special place that influences change and adaptation throughout the whole aquatic ecosystem. Perhaps, it occurs to me, this kind of habitat is an intriguing visual metaphor for what my colleague, film scholar Patricia Zimmermann, and I have been calling [open space documentary](#).

A new framework for community-based media is emerging, and I see it as this kind of riparian zone. Intentional participatory media experiments are proliferating across rapidly developing and evolving distribution platforms, and cinema-as-an-art-form is radically undergoing transformation. I see media now as a shape-shifting membrane stretching across microhabitats and impacting each in specific, yet often unpredictable ways. Mobile devices, apps, and social media have very quickly created biodiverse habitats where artists are able to test how media can not only communicate stories and imagine social change, but function as a dynamically evolving participatory “open space.”

These open spaces, for now, remain wild—as riparian wetlands that are springing up where professionals and citizens meet, intermingle using social media tools, and take pleasure in the sharing and remixing of older cinematic and media traditions with new ideas and technologies. For now, these zones blur distinctions between nonfiction and fiction, professional and amateur, audience and creator, powerful and subjected. They are distinctly permeable places where culture and social change meet in dialogue and synthesize new ways of thinking, imagining, and behaving.

In the biological riparian zone, a great variety of plant and wildlife communities co-exist, interact, and influence one another’s health and growth as part of the larger ecology. In this open space model, interactions that occur are similar, and interconnection means developing the strength to restore our media habitat and influence its health throughout the global social ecology.

OPEN SPACE DOCUMENTARY: A STRUGGLE AGAINST ENCLOSURE

I am particularly interested in how to liberate nonfiction media-making from the strictures of the long form documentary, where films are showcased in film festivals, might briefly appear on television and after all the work, have a hard time finding distribution or gaining enough of the attention that it takes to attract dedicated audiences.

The open space model, used as an organizing concept in urban planning and architecture, politics, education, and conferences, presents an alternative approach to traditional documentary practice, distribution, and impact assessments. It declares that convening and collaboration processes are equally important to completing the documentary artifact. Conversation and dialogue across disciplines and communities are important to a final outcome that can develop and change well past the completion of artifacts.

In place of ideology or advocacy, the model offers encounters that can be unexpected, unmediated, and unpredictable. Instead of national or global definitions, open space documentary points to hyperlocal and community-based media practices as key to bringing people with diverse interests together and weaving new networks across what may seem to be impossibly partisan or impenetrable boundaries.

As a way to frame the multiplying conversations we generate through social media interfaces, the idea of an open space documentary practice helps keep us connected and grounded in the real and authentic—a spirit and sensibility that independent media makers have struggled for and shaped over the last four decades.

As it builds on the focused victories of independent and community-based media, open space documentary now inhabits a thick and complicated landscape. Media is now untethered from the television and movie screen. It careens from virtual platforms to everywhere in the physical world—billboards, elevators, huge HD screens in public indoor spaces, and mobile handhelds in pockets. This environmental audiovisual overload presents a challenge—how to reach people through our media work, how to get people together for conversation and conviviality, and how to achieve real and profound impact through this work.

In a moment when organizations and institutions created in the 20th century to disseminate culture and communications are either disappearing or radically and quickly transforming, the open space model treats documentary media not as an object or an argument. It is an evolving space where producers, subjects, and users shape and reshape versions of a work or project through adaptation and transformation across virtual and real communities.

Media organizations—whether focused on creation, broadcast, or community engagement—are being challenged by their supporters to measure and produce data on impact. Yet the existing mechanisms for evaluating the impact of public and community media can no longer keep pace with the inventive ways people are figuring out how to use their increasingly sophisticated devices for making, connecting with, and sharing their media.

Open space documentary recognizes that artists and organizations need to explore new approaches to how we discuss impact in a world where people are either bombarded with and addicted to the information river rapids, or, because of social and economic circumstances, do not have access to communications tools, and are excluded from participating in civic and cultural discourse.

Why “OPEN SPACE” for Documentary

1. It can restore social, human-scaled, and local agency in new and unimagined ways. It invites new conversations and behaviors while connecting people. It fights fear with pleasure and fun.
2. It can convene people intentionally in real community spaces, offering experiences that reclaim patches of the social media environment from global corporatism.
3. It lives in and evolves through expansive networks, communities, and clusters beyond traditional media distribution channels; it encourages experimentation with multiple versions of a project from contributors across disciplines and generations.
4. It invites media makers and exhibitors to become “*context providers*” rather than “*content providers*,” reframing the more fluid movement and interconnections across disciplinary and political boundaries.
5. It encourages attention to micro and hyperlocal media ecologies where different discourses, practices, and dynamically shifting elements engage both conveners and participants in unanticipated ways.
6. It acknowledges and works within a permeable space in which collaboration, adaptability, decentralization, and migration across media platforms occurs frequently and with force.

OPEN SPACE MEDIA PROJECTS: EXPERIMENTS IN MAKING CHANGE

These three examples are dynamic and evolving laboratories for the qualities that exemplify the spirit of open space documentary. They are intentional media arts projects seeking to influence other areas of social change, from local to national. To be sure, there are now hundreds of others across the globe—both online and in physical locations—that are being used in communities and that test the artistic and social parameters of this framework. I encourage anyone to post other examples on Animating Democracy's Profiles site, and let us know how they work as open space documentary projects.

Saving the Sierra

Completed in 2008, [Saving the Sierra: Voices of Conservation in Action](#) has been an ambitious three-year transmedia regional documentary project created and developed by public-radio producer Catherine Stifter and community-based media maker and organizer jesikah maria ross. Collaborating over three years with people living in the mountain communities of the Sierra Nevada in California, Stifter and ross co-created a set of communication platforms for residents to connect around issues affecting them while also reaching outside the region to urban dwellers. Through multimedia storytelling linked to specific places along the spine of the range, both story booth and radio participants express the joys and challenges they face across this extraordinary biosphere. Residents reflect on water issues, rural poverty, land pressures and development, conservation and agriculture, history and cultural memory.

The Sierra Nevada region is 400 miles long and 80 miles wide, with only two million inhabitants. Over many months in 2007 the producers launched the project process by getting to know people and earning their confidence—with conversations and storytelling. Their intention was to build relationships first, before any media products were developed or created.

Both Stifter and ross were committed to trusting an open space technique that was one of the purest I've encountered. After listening to residents and developing an infrastructure design, they then created a mobile storybooth that they took to 13 events around the region. Travelling up and down the mountain range—from powwows to local business meetings, from community festivals to conferences—they invited people to tell their own stories in the booth. Out of this process, one theme emerged repeatedly, and it is what then organically informed the national thrust of the larger project: What happens when rural communities feel threatened by encroaching urban development?

It was important to ross and Stifter to create a website that was easily navigable and consciously aesthetic, for it was where the elements would live and eventually be archived. They curated and posted the storybooth tales online, using the website interface as a space in which to trigger a multifaceted dialogue about development and conservation, not only in the region, but also across the country.

Completed in 2008, early in online social media history, [Saving the Sierra](#) is a noteworthy iteration of an open space community media project. While inviting mountain community members into a clearly understood collaborative process from the beginning, they also met their objective to make a virtual space where local people could also experience social media from a personal, neighborhood, and relevant community point of view that made sense to them.

They were also able to develop the capacity for organizations and individuals to integrate this media for their own purposes. They encouraged re-posting of pieces on other websites and social media platforms and they promoted using *Saving the Sierra* pieces in meetings, newsletters, and events. Stifter and ross did everything they could with the resources and tools at hand to disseminate the project far and wide across isolated mountain communities.

By the time they were ready to produce their own national radio documentary during the second year of the project, they were sure of its focus: rural responses to the urban development pressures being placed on the mountain range. When the public radio documentary was completed, Stifter and ross had created an elegant multiplatform mosaic of voices giving a rich and detailed portrait of the issues. Even more importantly, *Saving the Sierra* is now a freely shared, living archive for activists and researchers to return to, re-use, and adapt for changing purposes across the years.

Precious Places Community History Project

From the mountains of California's Sierra Nevada to the memories of Philadelphia's neighborhood inhabitants, the open space model does not have to be Internet dependent.

Since 1982 [Scribe Video Center](#) has been a nationally known media arts production and education center whose mission is to give Philadelphia's emerging and midlevel media artists the skills and opportunities to use film and video for self-expression and for representing and supporting their communities. Since 2002 [The Precious Places Community History Project](#) has become a cornerstone of Scribe's work in the city and region and has made a video-based history of Philadelphia's and the surrounding region's neighborhoods, streets, and community landmarks, many of which no longer exist.

Precious Places teams up community groups and individual residents with experienced filmmakers and humanities consultants to create oral history-based videos exploring the

political and cultural history of public spaces in their neighborhoods. As a counterweight and response to the increasing ephemerality of the digital media stream, *Precious Places* is all the more meaningful. It resists forgetfulness and the throwaway distractions of the YouTube generation.

As a unique kind of neighborhood advocacy project, Scribe has developed a cultural production model where everyone on the creative team is “generating content” from a very special point of view that only emerges when something—like your home place—is at stake, and there is a deep emotional connection to be stewards of public memory. [The collection](#) includes filmed site-specific performance pieces, historical explorations of excavated and contemporary documents, experimental videos playing with fact and fiction, and traditional documentary portraits of all kinds of places in transition.

Each video piece takes almost a year to complete. Participants sign on and the subject of their exploration is chosen; they learn how to research and go through a production process, and they complete the final piece as a group. Among the [2010–11 Precious Places](#) projects are The United Negro Improvement Hall in North Philadelphia, the former Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity House in West Philadelphia, The Nile Swim Club in Yeadon, Pennsylvania, and the La Mott Community Garden in La Mott, Pennsylvania. Clips from the more than 60 videos can be seen [here](#).

This slow, local, and democratic creative investigation offers an example of how to reroot our digital technologies in historically continuous values and ethics that bind ordinary people and develop healthy communities. It is an underappreciated force, supple enough to avoid cultural obliteration—especially for people and places at risk for violence, poverty, and social isolation from the mainstream.

The works that have been developed in *Precious Places* come from the inside—people who are not professional media makers, but who inhabit a physical, real place deeply, and who can reveal its secrets, problems, and triumphs in ways outside historians might never know about or consider. And more significantly and poignantly, what is recorded or produced as a narrative in one-year’s project may come to mean something completely different once that era has passed into history and the buildings, neighborhoods, or lands are destroyed, rebuilt, or forgotten.

Lunch Love Community: When A Traditional Documentary Becomes Transmedia

In 1999 the Berkeley Unified School District created its groundbreaking and influential Food Policy mandating a goal to “provide nutritious, fresh, tasty, locally grown food that reflects Berkeley’s cultural diversity... and ensure that the food served [in the schools] be organic to the maximum extent possible.” It took 10 years for the School Lunch Initiative in Berkeley, California, to realize that dream. And now this Bay Area city leads the nation

in offering children a cooking and gardening curriculum in the classroom that is directly tied to their daily school lunch experience.

I began my one-hour documentary project [Open Minds Open Mouths](#) in 2008 with scant resources in hand and many foundation proposals to write to obtain funding. When completed, the film will explore, through the prism of this community's soul, how a group of determined cooks, educators, parents, health advocates, politicians, and food purveyors were able to create, from scratch, a program that offers fresh, homemade, organic breakfast and lunch to all children in the public schools.



King Middle School lunchtime from [Lunch Love Community/Open Minds Open Mouths](#). Photo: Sophie Constantinou

Because I had no funding resources going into this project, I had to be receptive to a different way of organizing its creative process. This is Slow Media. Our family lives in Berkeley, so already it is a hyperlocal, backyard project. I could spend months watching workers in the kitchens, teachers in the classrooms, and students in the gardens and start connecting to the people I would eventually be talking to on camera. When I

began to shoot alone with a small digital camera, people inside the system were already familiar with me and understood enough of the process to grant me permission to record.

By the time I joined with partnering co-producers at [Citizen Film](#) in San Francisco and [Media Working Group](#) in Portland, I was ready to try something completely unusual for this type of project. Rather than wait to complete the long form documentary when funding came in, we reconceptualized the work to build momentum around growing public interest in school-lunch reform and pending national legislation for the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, which was working its way through Congress in 2010.

Using the media we'd already shot, Co-Producer Sophie Constantinou and I created an open space, transmedia documentary project called [Lunch Love Community](#). The project continues to live online with a mosaic-like suite of short films available for anyone to "watch and share." In a dynamic social media space, we offer our "users" (not audiences anymore) our evolving and shareable media, tools, and resources.

We have used social media to get the word out that the [Lunch Love Community](#) webisodes are free to anyone, or any group for re-posting, to share virally, to blog about, or to show in live community screenings. They can be watched on mobile devices or on DVD. The suite of short (3



Lunch Love Community. Photo: Sophie Constantinou

to 10 minute) documentary films offers a variety of tones and storytelling approaches – all playing with the concentrated, episodic form that lends itself so well to internet media-viewing habits. We include glimpses into the history and vision of this Berkeley initiative – how a group of parents turned their anger into a policy and an initiative with city and district support. We look at how the program works—from the kitchen labor and operations to the gardening and cooking curriculum. Many individuals have contributed to this vision, and their passion has brought it to a functioning and evolving daily reality.

The website, films, writings and resources are evolving as an interconnected and evolving organism as the project goes forward, and technology changes. We've encouraged a social media community to grow around *Lunch Love Community* by starting a [Facebook group](#) and by fundraising for the project through [Kickstarter](#). I am [blogging](#) about our creative process making Lunch Love Community while incubating and collecting data about it as an open space model that will develop and change in real time over the next three years.

Lunch Love Community is an evolving open space documentary project because its intentional organizing principle is to set up and encourage ongoing dialogue and connection on a local human scale: not only among the people who work in school lunch programs, but community members who are working for food justice and food system reform in a climate-changing world.

Rather than being asked to simply agree or disagree with an advocacy message, our audiences are cross-disciplinary users, who we invite to freely engage with the work as a transmedia experience, and as a “commons” for inspiration, debate or revision. It is, like

the Berkeley School Lunch Initiative itself, a creative step toward bringing citizens together to imagine or reinterpret their own community policies around changing the way children eat, food justice and food system reform. It is part of an engagement ethos where art has a central role to play in how civic action is unfolding in the 21st century – gathering people together both online and in real life to work together to impact policy and social change.

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS: SPECULATIONS ON OPEN SPACE DOCUMENTARY

By placing some emerging trends in documentary practice in the frame of open space, I want to recognize the enormous structural transformations we are undergoing now in culture and telecommunications and how art is connected to social and civic change.

Because of its reach and power to persuade, cinema has always been at the forefront as an instrument to support social change and deliver strong messages. In a U.S. society now bifurcated by partisan media that speaks only to its own constituents and believers, we might consider how an open space methodology could disrupt the process of widening polarization.

Since technology and the spaces in which we receive information are now under construction continuously, the following working statements are meant to inspire imaginative responses to the idea of open space documentary that is not dependent on devices and technologies.

Since these statements point to the energy and strength that comes from sharing a wide array of human values, they can help redefine how the arts engage, in the digital age, with the impulse for social renewal and change.

1. If technology is now the primary shaper of human identity in a world of increasingly seductive illusions, how can we recognize its effects and revise them—as artists, performers, and writers—differently?
2. Open space documentary stimulates creative inquiry into how we practice empathetic dialogue: within ourselves, with other individuals, in a larger community, and across our broader society.
3. In this model, rapidly evolving technological interfaces liberate artists to explore new ways to frame community activities as creative practice and to weave them into a larger social fabric of history and memory.

4. For open space documentary to be successful, a project team must agree with a group of commonly shared values that organize the project. They must also constantly articulate and test how much they can tolerate a horizontal process that allows input from a variety of different participants.
5. This model holds the promise to help in the building of strong local infrastructures by developing living archives of public memory and history that resist control by consumer and corporate agendas.
6. Open space projects embrace a spirit of “amplitude,” including the intention to view a subject from every possible perspective; curiosity about and compassion for the thinking of other people and other eras (i.e., holding deep historical perspectives and transmitting values across generations); and the assumption that collaborations and interactions are reciprocally beneficial and open-ended.
7. Open space documentary reanimates the processes and outcomes of co-creation among individuals and groups. These processes can be playful, reflective, and capable of endless variety; always moving between self-awareness and the external world of public interaction; encouraging competing theories and systems; and protective of the capacity to learn and grow beyond original conceptions or storylines.
8. Open space documentary can emulate a game-like structure, with many potential and unpredictable outcomes.
9. This model creates an environment for dialogue around a topic or issue that is not based on opinion or argument, but rather catalyzes possible next steps needed to connect, communicate, and collaborate on human-scaled local actions.
10. Open space documentary reclaims media technologies in order to recombine public, democratic, and social relationships in all their subtle and complicated interactions.

AN OPEN ENDING: POINTS ON THE HORIZON

Projects are burgeoning, containing echoes of traditional film practices as well as reaching into the new digital frontier for impact and connection. I see it in film festivals around the country showcasing new digital media, both in physical as well as virtual screening rooms. Programs and new works are developing in other deeply-rooted community-based media organizations around the country—I am thinking about the work of [Arts Engine](#) in New York, [Bay Area Video Coalition](#) in San Francisco, [The Art of Regional Change](#) at UC Davis, [Allied Media Projects](#) in Detroit, [Open Video Alliance](#) in New York, and the [FLEFF Open Space Project](#) at Ithaca College.

As an approach, open space documentary interrogates the role of unbridled media saturation and asks how can we give our work as artists, media makers, and community builders greater meaning, depth, and impact in a Google-search era. In my experience it is networks of emerging or longstanding artist groups, community media and arts organizations, institutions like museums, and forward-thinking funders who now have a crucial and central role to play in nurturing and supporting new models like open space documentary.

It is organizations rooted in community that can embody the rich and stabilizing qualities of a biological riparian zone—connecting and forming new relationships among artists, activists and citizen participants or general audiences. Because of the complicated and demanding nature of this work, artists clearing this new territory must work in collaboration—at multiple points in the process—with organizations.

These efforts together will give new and experimental projects a protected place to grow, develop, and offer greater meaning; they offer an anchor for evolving engagement strategies and a values-based framework in an ephemeral digital environment.

Helen De Michiel is a filmmaker, writer, and, from 1996–2010, Executive and Co-Director of the [National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture](#). You can watch and share her evolving transmedia documentary (co-produced with Sophie Constantinou) at [Lunch Love Community](#).

This essay is adapted from the research, scholarly writing, production, and work in [The Open Space Project](#), an on-going, international, collaborative project exploring new dimensions of documentary led by Patricia R. Zimmermann and Helen De Michiel.

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