

Hardrock Revision

Artists reconsider a mine site in Lake City, Colorado

Public art is a dynamic and expanding endeavor. As art's concerns adjust to our increasingly complex world, the role of artist is shifting from object maker to problem solver. This summer, the Colorado Art Ranch in conjunction with the town of Lake City, Colorado, embraced this definition of public art in the Hardrock Revision residency, during which a transdisciplinary team of artists explored how to reclaim, preserve, and give new life to Lake City's inactive Ute Ulay Mine.

Perched on the Alpine Loop, a rugged and popular route for off-roaders, the mine is about three miles from Lake City and reflects the larger history of the San Juan Mountains. Named for the Indians it displaced through the Bruno Treaty of 1873, the Ute Ulay produced silver, lead, and zinc in a constant state of boom and bust until 1912, and then operated only sporadically until 1995. Each time the mine opened, the community filled with hopes of economic stability, which never materialized. The shuttered mine left the community with a pile of tailings—the potentially toxic discards from the milling process—and water quality concerns. Yet the site is a valuable cultural asset and offers opportunities for economic development, particularly as a destination for visitors interested in history, recreation, and sustainability.

When the current owner, LKA International, proposed donating the mine, the mill, and the former residential sites to Hinsdale County, the community was interested, but also cautious. They pursued a brownfields report, which revealed that environmental concerns are manageable. They also contacted Grant Pound, executive director of Colorado Art Ranch. This nomadic interdisciplinary arts organization brings artists to small towns to use the arts to address issues of those towns. Lake City wanted help envisioning what to do with the mine. Thus, Hardrock Revision was born.

The Residency

For the month-long residency, Pound assembled a team of seven core members: Hannah Fries, a Massachusetts poet; Bland Hoke, a sculptor from Wyoming; Julia Lewandoski, a public historian and musician living in Montreal; Anna Macleod, a sculptor and environmental artist based in Ireland; Lydia Moyer, a videographer and educator from Virginia; Becky Sobell, a landscape

architect from Manchester, England; and myself, Linda Wysong, an interdisciplinary artist from Portland, Oregon.

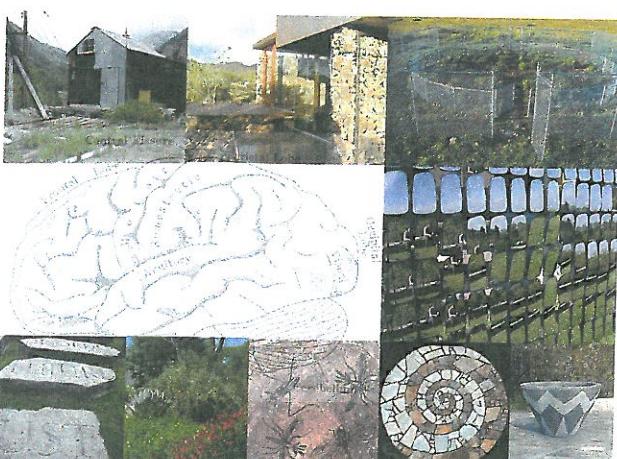
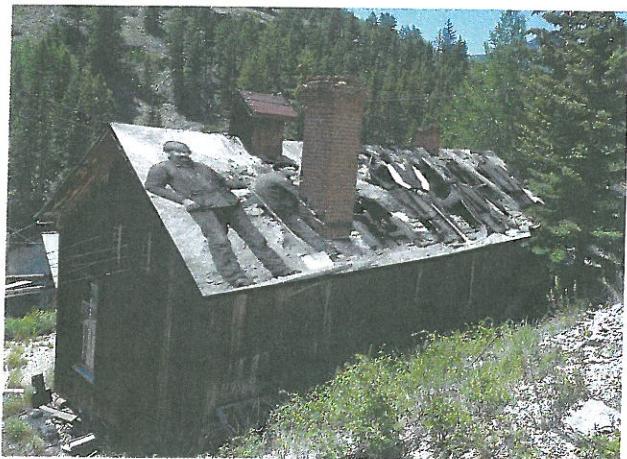
The team explored the mine, met with visiting scientists and a host of advisors, learned about the region, delved into the community and its history, and got to know the people who live and vacation at an altitude of 8,600 feet. Since the community has only 400 residents, it is appropriate to question the wisdom of bringing in "outsiders." But Pound and Kristine Borchers from Lake City's Downtown Improvement and Revitalization Team (DIRT) did their homework and forged valuable links. Throughout the residency, the artists had weekly meetings with a Community Advisory Committee whose enthusiastic support opened the citizens' hearts, minds, and homes.

"It was helpful having such a diverse group and the experiences and knowledge brought from various corners of the globe," says Marian Hollingsworth, president of DIRT. "I believe that the month of conversations deepened an awareness of the Ute Ulay. It is a valuable asset which could be lost."

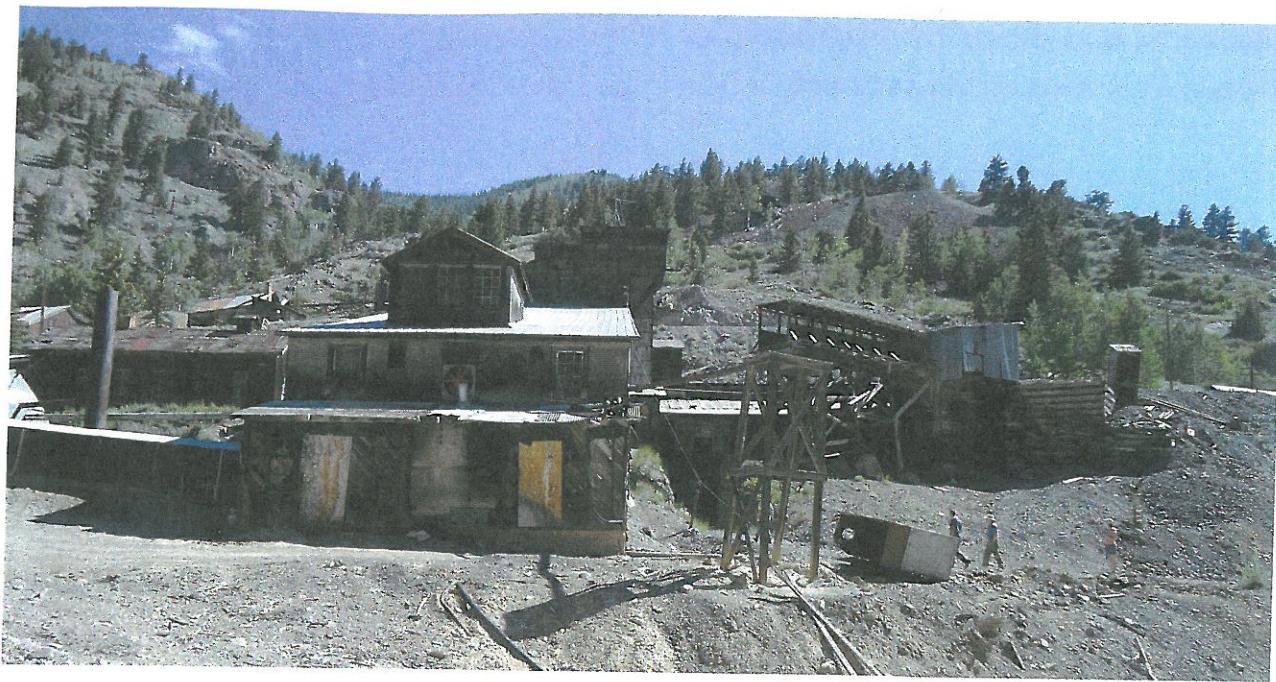
A Range of Possibilities

Beginning with an examination of history and place, the Hardrock team shifted from thinking about place as a fixed location to seeing it as a dynamic set of relationships tempered by time, experience, and narrative. This encouraged a multi-layered proposal. The vision for the Ute Ulay embraced the historic preservation of the buildings, acknowledged the 10,000 years of Ute culture, highlighted the stories of hope and hardship endured by the prospectors, and established a framework for a dynamic future through reuse and ecologically sensitive development. The dual goals of conservation and growth were pursued through the underlying principles of transparency, historic preservation, fun, function, and environmental awareness.

After a month of living and working in Lake City, the team members presented their ideas at a day-long Artposium, complete with maps, a model, and a lot of conversation. The proposals offered an eclectic mix of the practical and the imaginative. For leaking roofs, the group recommended tarps, each a potential canvas for a temporary painting. Shoring up the head frame, a structure over the mineshaft, was recognized as a sculpture



Artists recommended tarps as an artful temporary fix to help buildings survive the winter (left) and sketched ideas for transforming a historically insignificant site into a learning center (right).



opportunity. Proposals to provide habitation and income included establishing a hostel in the old boarding house, constructing visual access to the mill building, restoring the trolley as a tram, and even establishing a zip line for adventurous travelers. Ways to incorporate sustainable energy ranged from generating electricity with floating generators to using burros as alternative transport.

The single element that most distinguished the Hardrock team's vision from the standard reclamation process was the tailings pile. The usual procedure is to bury or cap mine tailings, making them disappear. The Hardrock team recognized the tailings pile as an earthwork with enormous symbolic and physical value and recommended that it be sealed and kept as a tribute to the work that shaped the site.

Art as Experience

Hardrock Revision was a cooperative effort between a nonprofit arts organization (Colorado Art Ranch) and a civic nonprofit (DIRT) with the support of the Hinsdale County Commissioners. Because they were not tied to the policies of an established arts commission, the organizers were able to display a light-footed sense of improvisation that was a good fit for an innovative town with a small budget and an active citizenry.

The Hardrock Revision collaboration was not intended to result in a piece of traditional public art, but to engage and inspire the participants and the community. This type of art is about time and space, similar in many ways to music or theater. Success is not judged by the craftsmanship or impact of an icon, but by the power of the concepts and the level of engagement. In this way, Hardrock Revision's focus on process and interaction entered the realm of social practice, which shifts the definition of art from the closed loop of the eternal object to a set of dynamic relationships directly connected to our lived experience.

Colorado Art Ranch has challenged the traditional parameters of the usually solitary artist residency by turning it into an opportunity for social engagement. Hardrock Revision enlarged the civic dialogue around the role of the artist in contemporary society and the fundamental definition of public art.

ABOVE: The Ute Ulay Mine near Lake City, Colorado. BELOW: Proposals for the site included turning a water tank into a camera obscura with wheelchair access (top), as well as rebuilding the aerial tramway used to haul ore and miners and adding a zip line (bottom).

