



Road Art

Community project recycles signs into artwork

by Roberta Levine

SOMETIMES, WHAT PEOPLE FROM SMALL TOWNS can accomplish may surprise you. Take Meadville, a city with a population of approximately 14,000 in Crawford County. If you exit off I-79 onto Route 322 and drive into Meadville, you'll find an unusual display of public art made from recycled road signs.

Titled *Read Between the Signs*, it is a massive sculptural relief covering more than 1,000 feet of fence line that bounds the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) Maintenance Facility, that serves almost like a billboard advertising the region's offerings.

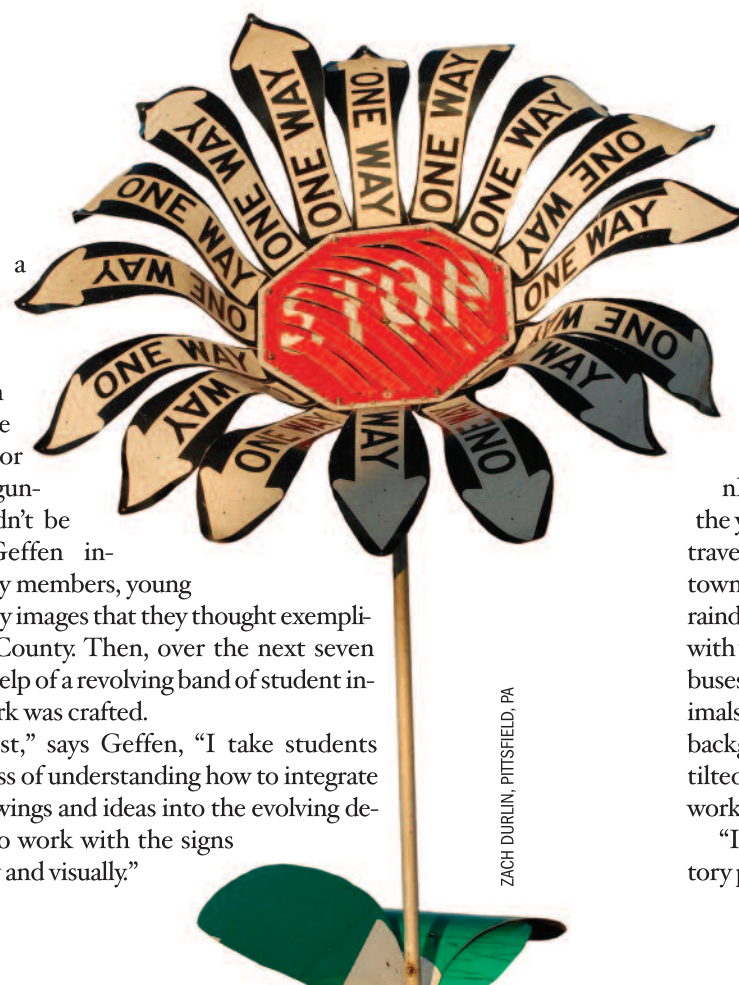
"The sculpture describes a progressive community that is interested in recycling, transportation, history and culture," says Andy Walker, director of Meadville's Redevelopment Authority.

The project began in 2002 when Jack Molke, then PennDOT's Crawford County maintenance manager, asked Allegheny College Professor of Art Amara Geffen if she had any ideas for dressing up the depot that houses PennDOT's road equipment, trucks and mountains of salt and gravel. Geffen's response: Treat the fence like a Matisse cutout and make a sign-art painting that

would act as a screen.

Molke provided the materials—aluminum signs that were faded, dented or riddled with gunshots and couldn't be reused—and Geffen invited community members, young and old, to supply images that they thought exemplified Crawford County. Then, over the next seven years, with the help of a revolving band of student interns, the artwork was crafted.

"As lead artist," says Geffen, "I take students through a process of understanding how to integrate community drawings and ideas into the evolving design, and how to work with the signs both technically and visually."



ZACH DURLIN, PITTSFIELD, PA

Read Between the Signs showcases PennDOT signs that can no longer be used as an artistic mural led by an Allegheny College art professor. The assembly of Matisse-like cutouts has won several award over the years.

The sculpture incorporates the concepts of recycling and sustainability, two themes that are emblematic of PennDOT's mission, and uses images from the four seasons of the year to provide unity. Approaching the artwork from I-79, a traveler first encounters spring scenes, from a train steaming into town to a thunderstorm complete with bolts of lightning and raindrops. The summer section highlights nearby Conneaut Lake with water-related activities, while in the autumn section, school buses travel over roads, leaves are raked, and farm and forest animals are shown. To depict winter, Geffen cleverly uses the white background of highway speed limit signs to show snow. The signs' tilted, topsy-turvy text provides energy and texture to the artwork.

"It's accessible," comments Dr. Charlotte Wellman, an art history professor at Edinboro University. "and it encourages people

to hunt for familiar landscapes, reminding them of what's valuable about regional interests."

Since the first 180 feet were installed in August 2002, each year has seen more images crafted. "The whole thing came together like a ballad," says PennDOT employee Paul Kerchin.

An undertaking of this scope requires a collaborative effort. The student interns are paid with money from Allegheny College's CEED program, and outside funding sources cover the remainder of the costs. PennDOT donated the work site, materials and staff as needed. The project has netted several awards, including a Western Pennsylvania Environmental Award and two granting rounds from the Mid-Atlantic Foundation's Artists and Communities Program.

Erie Art Museum Director John Vanco, whose institution helps to manage the funds, calls the sculpture "a truly remarkable piece of community-based artwork. It's so creative to use the highway signs, and Geffen's artistic vision makes it a work of art."

—Roberta Levine writes from Meadville.