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Bailey Quanbeck
University of South Dakota

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 RESEARCH ARTICLE

Art Intervention Amid a Pandemic: A Pentadic Analysis of the Vermillion Street Piano

Bailey Quanbeck, B.A.

*University of South Dakota Communication Strategist
M.A. Graduate Student, Department of Communication Studies
Bailey.Quanbeck@usd.edu
University of South Dakota
Vermillion, SD*

Abstract

The Vermillion Street Piano was an art intervention introduced to the community of Vermillion, South Dakota during the COVID-19 pandemic. By applying Burke's (1945/1962) pentad to this artifact and analyzing the *scene-act* ratio, I argue that the materialistic (i.e., scenic) constraints surrounding the piano meaningfully shaped and motivated the community experiences facilitated by the instrument. As street art situated in an outdoor, unsupervised location, the piano invited creative engagement from the community while suffering damages. The scenic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic both augmented the therapeutic experiences offered through this art piece and presented risks for community members seeking interaction. An application of perspective by incongruity (Burke, 1935/1984) complements this pentadic analysis by underscoring the significance of the *scene*; the appearance and location of the instrument challenged traditional assumptions about art and music. The Vermillion Street Piano is one illustration of the many ways the COVID-19 pandemic shaped and will continue to impact social activities around the world.

Introduction

In early 2020, communities in countries around the world turned to art and music to share frustration, grief, and hope amid the COVID-19 pandemic. From impromptu serenades on balconies to murals emphasizing the importance of preventive measures, a wide range of public art emerged to directly or indirectly comment on the pandemic and the public's response to it (Gupta, 2020). This "coronavirus art," as Gupta (2020) referred to it, often took the form of street art, lending an opportunity for artists and their communities to engage in conversation about COVID-19 and partake in unifying experiences with others from afar.

One example of coronavirus art emerged in the southeast corner of South Dakota. In September of 2020, a local artist introduced a colorful piano to the streets of downtown Vermillion as an art intervention piece meant to facilitate community experiences. The Vermillion Street Piano invited passersby to create music in a public space at a time when community members were separated by at least six feet of physical distance. Kenneth Burke's (1945/1962) pentad offers a useful lens with which to understand the significance of this context in relation to the instrument and the influence of the dominant term. In this essay I explore the significance of the *scene* of the Vermillion Street Piano by analyzing the *scene-act* ratio and considering perspective by incongruity, arguing that the spatial and temporal contexts

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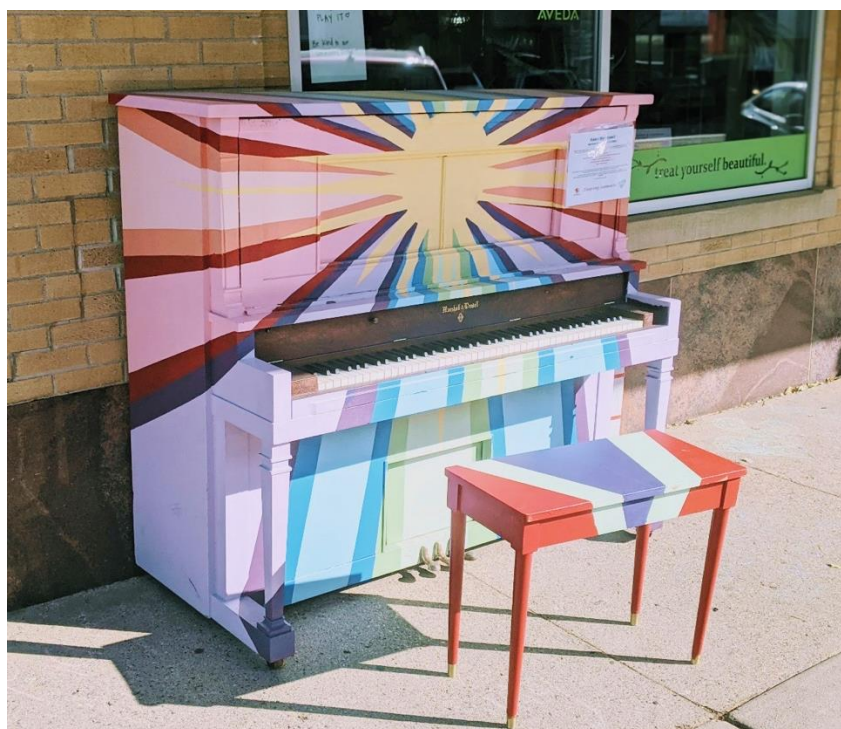
meaningfully shaped and motivated the community experiences facilitated by the Vermillion Street Piano.

Description of Artifact

The Vermillion Street Piano was an art intervention introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The piano resided outdoors on a sidewalk in front of a salon in Vermillion, South Dakota – the home of the University of South Dakota and 11,000 South Dakotans (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Community members had the opportunity to play the piano at any time of day. Every square inch of the piano (except the piano keys, the wood directly above the keys, and the pedals) was coated in paint. At the front and center of the piano, where one might place sheet music, was a pastel yellow sun sending beams of yellow paint out to the perimeters of the instrument. The colorful rays of paint surrounding the sun – including shades of red, orange, pink, purple, blue, and green – stretched over the top, sides, and legs of the piano (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Vermillion Street Piano, painted by Susan Heggstad. Photo taken October 10, 2020.



An accompanying bench presented a similar pattern and more prominently featured red and purple paint (see Figure 1). A sheet of paper taped against the salon’s window shared, “YES! YOU CAN PLAY IT ♡ Be kind to our community piano ♡.” A laminated piece of paper taped onto the piano itself read, “Enjoy the piano! Anyone is welcome to play,” and presented information about the organizations and people who contributed to the creation of the piano.

I was drawn to this artifact because of its significance as an accessible, interactive piece of public art in a small community at a time when gathering was limited due to the COVID-19

pandemic. As a Vermillion resident who lived within earshot of the piano, I observed the joy community members experienced as they interacted with the instrument and created musical experiences for themselves and for strangers nearby. This proximity to the artifact afforded me the opportunity to witness how the piano served and was treated by the Vermillion community, and it also inspired my interest in understanding how this piece of public art functioned to enliven and unite a rural town amid challenging circumstances.

Method

Burke's (1945/1962) pentadic criticism offers an appropriate lens with which to understand the significance of the context surrounding the Vermillion Street Piano. Burke's (1966) concept of dramatism provided the foundation for pentadic criticism; Burke (1966) likened life to theatre, suggesting that human behavior and motivations can be understood by drawing connections to drama. Philosophers and playwrights had made similar comparisons prior to Burke, though Burke is known for developing and popularizing pentadic criticism as a means of analysis (Edgley, 2003).

Foss (2018) noted that dramatism is based on two assumptions. The first is that "language constitutes action, not motion," meaning that people actively create language and rely on symbols to constitute reality and pursue goals (p. 367). These actions are defined by choices, purpose, and motion. The second assumption emphasizes the concept of the drama, suggesting that "humans develop and present messages in much the same way that a play is presented" (Foss, 2018, p. 368). How people choose to describe and interpret those messages based on other frames of reference reflects the symbolic ways humans make and reproduce meaning.

The pentad consists of five elements: *act*, *agent*, *agency*, *scene*, and *purpose* (Burke, 1945/1962). Foss (2018) explained that – when applied to a symbolic act – these elements shed light on the motivation and justification behind an action. To further understand the significance of these elements in a given situation, critics identify ratios, which combine two salient elements to illuminate how they interact and to guide understanding of an artifact.

Each of the five elements of the pentad reflects a particular worldview: *act* corresponds with realism, *agent* with idealism, *agency* with pragmatism, *scene* with materialism, and *purpose* with mysticism (Burke, 1945/1962). By examining the dominant element in relation to its philosophical school, one can better explore the implications of that feature and contextualize the artifact within a larger conversation about human behavior.

Perspective by Incongruity

Burke (1935/1984) also articulated the concept of perspective by incongruity. Burke (1935/1984) explained that using metaphors to combine two things traditionally seen as oppositional may present opportunities for greater and more nuanced understanding; by problematizing binary divisions and unveiling these connections, one can expand their own perspectives on the social world and challenge others' long-held assumptions about reality.

Pentadic Criticism and Nonverbal Artifacts

Pentadic criticism has frequently been employed in analyses of discursive works, though it can also be an effective lens for studying nonverbal artifacts as sites of communication and

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persuasion. Burke's (1966) conceptualization of rhetoric acknowledged the significance of nonverbal elements and the value of studying symbols in a variety of forms – “mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on” (p. 28). By using an expansive definition of rhetoric that accommodates nonverbal communication, one can explore additional layers of persuasion and meaning making. Hill and Helmers (2004) built on this definition of rhetoric, noting the variety of artifacts that can be considered visual rhetoric and suggesting that visual subjects invite new possibilities for discussion and analysis.

Weitz (1990) emphasized the relevance of the pentad for understanding nonverbal artifacts by applying Burke's (1945/1962) ideas to art education. Weitz (1990) explained that traditional art critiques in the classroom have focused on commentary that follows “a four-stage process of criticism – description, analysis, interpretation, [and] evaluation” guided by comparisons to famous, historical works (p. 132). This approach has been subjected to criticism for dictating standards regarding what constitutes “good” art. Weitz (1990) suggested that pentadic analysis may allow for greater nuance in art critiques, as it encourages critics to examine art holistically and take cultural contexts into account. This perspective speaks to a strength of pentadic criticism, especially in relation to visual rhetoric: This method provides a framework for recognizing and legitimizing various elements at play in art, including those that cannot be seen within the artwork itself.

Tennison (2017) further explored the intersection of rhetorical analysis, nonverbal artifacts, and visual art by applying the pentad to the *NOLA Children Series* created by Banksy, an anonymous street artist. Tennison (2017) identified the ratios evident for each piece in the series, frequently pointing to *scene* and *purpose* as the salient elements. In doing so, Tennison (2017) highlighted the significance of the locations Banksy selected for his art and the political motivations driving his activism. For example, in an analysis of *Levee Boy*, Tennison (2017) noted that this image of a boy with an umbrella – which is painted onto a levee – becomes “haunting” when water levels rise (p. 66); the graffiti's placement on the Industrial Canal Flood Wall in New Orleans emphasizes the human error that contributed to the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. This rhetorical analysis underscored the significance of the pentad as a tool for examining nonverbal works and highlighting the powerful communication made possible by street art.

Pentadic Criticism and the Vermillion Street Piano

Burke's (1966) concept of life as drama is apt when considering the theatrical experience offered by the Vermillion Street Piano. The piano was a participatory object, inviting passersby to interact with it in a unique time and space. The drama would commence when community members stopped and engaged with the instrument. By interacting with this piece of art, community members produced music while also abstractly orchestrating a larger drama through their participation. Furthermore, the pentad provides a useful structure for exploring how contextual elements interacted to shape experiences at the piano. The *agency*, *agent*, *purpose*, *scene*, and *act* associated with the Vermillion Street Piano each offer a layer of meaning to the artifact, though the time and space in which the piano was situated are the most significant factors in this drama.

Validity

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I shared a draft of this paper with the piano's artist, Susan Heggstad, to ensure that the story of the art intervention was conveyed accurately and that the analysis reflected the Vermillion Street Piano's role in our community. They provided enthusiastic confirmation and offered additional insight into their personal experience creating the piece, which was then incorporated into the paper.

Applying the Pentad

I aim to explore how the Vermillion Street Piano functioned as a uniting force in its community not despite the surrounding context, but because of it. Applying Burke's (1945/1962) pentad to the Vermillion Cultural Association's street piano is useful in identifying the significance of various elements at play; through a pentadic analysis of this artifact, the following terms arise.

Agency

The *agency* is the Vermillion Street Piano itself. The piece was a visually captivating work of art, displaying bright colors and conveying a sense of warmth through imagery of a sun. The vibrancy of the piano's appearance complemented the interactive elements of the piece; as a familiar musical instrument, the piano invited interaction from anyone brave or curious enough to press a key. The instrument held the capacity for the creation of music and compelled the *agent* to participate.

Agent

The *agent* in this drama is comprised of the community members who engaged with the instrument, starting with those who made the art piece possible and then encompassing all who interacted with it. The instrument was donated by June Mikkelson, and local artist Susan Heggstad then transformed the standard instrument into a colorful work of art displaying vibrant rays of paint. The piano's debut to the public took the form of an inaugural performance by Dale Johnson, a pianist in the Vermillion community, on September 25, 2020 (Vermillion Cultural Association, n.d.). Community members wearing masks observed the performance from a distance as Johnson, who also wore a mask, played the piano in the instrument's new, public forum (Wynie Mae's AVEDA Salon & Spa, 2020a). Johnson would be the first of many community members to play the piano. Individuals of all ages and skill levels would plunk a few notes while strolling past the instrument or stop to sit at the bench and play lengthier songs.

Purpose

The Vermillion Street Piano was created with the intention of uniting a community through accessible, interactive art. This project was one element of Heggstad's and the Vermillion Cultural Association's (n.d.) *Imagining Community* series, which was supported by a Change Network grant through National Art Strategies and the Bush Foundation. Through this series, Heggstad and the Vermillion Cultural Association (n.d.) set out to present the community with "fun and creative arts interventions aimed at bringing joy, calm, and healing into daily life, even at a distance" (para. 1).

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Scene

Both the spatial *scene* and the temporal *scene* of this drama are pertinent to a pentadic analysis of the piano. The Vermillion Street Piano was located on the sidewalk outside of Wynie Mae's AVEDA Spa & Salon on Main Street in downtown Vermillion. Somewhat shielded from the elements by an awning, the piano was available to the public throughout even the coldest months of the South Dakota winter at all hours of the day. The piano was introduced to the Vermillion community during the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (2020) had declared COVID-19 a pandemic approximately six months prior to the initial placement of the instrument. At the time of the piano's debut, the City of Vermillion had a city-wide emergency resolution indicating that masks were expected in commercial establishments, and many local businesses took additional precautions such as limiting or removing indoor seating options, requiring or recommending that customers wear masks, and utilizing plexiglass barriers between customers and employees to increase safety (Governing Body of the City of Vermillion, South Dakota, 2020).

Act

The *act* evident in this drama is the creation of community experiences. As a Vermillion community member, Heggstad initiated this *act* by bringing the art piece to life in collaboration with the Vermillion Cultural Association. In the months that followed, the *act* expanded to include playing the piano – but also singing, dancing, and laughing as the community discovered and embraced the instrument. Sometimes the community experiences were shared by friends and family huddled around the piano. Even when only one person was present, however, community experiences were unfolding; by playing the piano, a single individual could enter the larger story of community that the piano embodied. Furthermore, this *act* could be shared by an incidental audience who listened from downtown apartments or outdoor restaurant seating in the distance. The piano became a site for exploring creativity, celebrating art, and bringing joy to listeners nearby and afar.

Scene-Act Ratio

The *scene* surrounding the Vermillion Street Piano is significant and operates as the dominant term of the pentad, with the prevailing ratio being *scene-act* – a pairing Burke (1945/62) described as the “container and thing contained” (p. 3). The piano's spatial and temporal *scene* shaped and inspired the community experiences that emerged within that *scene*. Initially, the piano's location – on the sidewalk in downtown Vermillion – is notable. The instrument was situated in a high walking traffic area that was within earshot of many local businesses. Its central location on Main Street offered a very public space at the heart of the Vermillion community. Bekki Engquist-Schroeder, the owner of Wynie Mae's AVEDA Salon & Spa, captured the significance of this location in cultivating a sense of togetherness and calm when she noted in an interview, “The piano really radiates out from this area, about a half a block either direction.... And people literally stop what they're doing, sit down, take a deep breath and just listen. That is priceless” (as cited in Forster, 2020, para. 12).

Additionally, because the piano was available outdoors at all hours of the day, the instrument relinquished orderliness and properness; its public presence invited a kind of unbridled creativity from passersby that may not have been evident if the piano was located behind closed doors. This simultaneously made the piano susceptible to ill-intentioned actions. When sharing a photo of the piano's new bench, artist Susan Heggstad had remarked, "The street piano was in need of a glammed-up bench, so this got painted. Not TOO pretty, in the hopes that it won't get stolen" (Susan M Heggstad Artworks, 2020). The bench disappeared a few weeks later and was then replaced with an unassuming chair. Soon thereafter, on the morning following Halloween, the chair was merely a pile of splintered pieces, with rods of wood scattered around the street corner. In the comments of a video depicting someone playing the piano while standing, Wynie Mae's AVEDA Salon & Spa (2020b) confirmed that both seating options had been destroyed.

The unforgiving nature of South Dakota fall and winter followed, and the colder weather presumably began dissuading passersby from lingering at the piano. Rain, snow, and wind resulted in a layer of grime on the instrument's once-vibrant paint, and the paint began to peel away from the wood surface of the piano (see Figure 2). Due to the cold weather, the piano's missing seating, or both, the sounds of the Vermillion Street Piano subsided significantly during the late winter months of 2020 following the instrument's initial introduction to the community.

Figure 2

Weathered surfaces of the Vermillion Street Piano. Photo taken November 14, 2020.



The outdoor, public, unsupervised *scene* that the piano inhabited carried possibilities for both creation and destruction. The *scene* facilitated lively activity on some days while restricting that energy on others. While the *scene* may have presented limitations, the spatial context of the piano and the consequential shifts that the piano experienced are inextricable from street art; these qualities enabled the instrument to function as an accessible, interactive piece for the

public. In this genre of art, the possibility for destruction and wear is a necessary cost in exchange for the lively and creative possibilities afforded by a public, outdoor space.

Perhaps even more significant than the spatial location of the piano, however, is the period of time in which the art intervention was introduced. The COVID-19 pandemic eliminated many opportunities for public, social gatherings, as restaurants closed off their indoor dining, events were canceled, businesses directed their employees to work from home, and individuals segmented themselves off from the wider community for safety reasons. Vermillion residents – like so many people around the world – were prompted to reimagine what “community” looks like when they must stay at least six feet apart from one another. Amid a time of uncertainty and distance, the piano provided an outlet for community members to express themselves, share art with others, and appreciate a colorful, musical distraction from the challenges they were facing.

In the early stages of the U.S.’s response to COVID-19, Gupta (2020) commented on the significance of music, visual art, and film as vehicles for healing, expression, and solidarity in times of crisis – and, more specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gupta (2020) drew connections to art therapy, suggesting that making and witnessing art during a crisis can have a positive impact on one’s health and sense of community. As a public piece of art introduced during a crisis, the Vermillion Street Piano facilitated this healing and offered community members a momentary reprieve from the daily stressors of the pandemic. The instrument can be seen as a vehicle for processing grief – for translating difficult emotions into art that is playful, bright, and communal. The Vermillion community embraced the piano and the catharsis it offered, carrying on a precedent that had been set in the earliest stages of the piano project; Heggstad noted that creating the piano and sharing it with the community was a therapeutic process in and of itself:

It proved to be a poignant bit of therapy for me during the painting, but ESPECIALLY once it was installed downtown. Watching from across the street while Dale played to that little group gathered on the sidewalk was honestly one of my most emotional moments of the pandemic. (personal communication, May 3, 2021).

The temporal *scene* not only inspired the creation of the piano, but also augmented the instrument’s emotional impact on the artist and community members alike in the resulting *act*.

While the piano did offer opportunities for healing and community building, the scenic conditions also carried the weight of health concerns. By calling on community members to make music, the piano did not merely present visual or audible art, as did many pieces of coronavirus art described by Gupta (2020); rather, the piano compelled people to touch a common surface, thus introducing an opportunity for risk. In a scientific brief released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) in early April of 2021, the organization recounted studies that suggested “the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection via the fomite transmission route is low, and generally less than 1 in 10,000, which means that each contact with a contaminated surface has less than a 1 in 10,000 chance of causing an infection” (Background section). The risk of transmission in outdoor areas was estimated to be even lower (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

A bottle of hand sanitizer was often available atop the piano to increase safety, and it did not appear that many community members played the piano in quick succession. With these details taken into consideration, and given the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (2021) updated guidance on the very low risk of infection via fomite transmission, we can

assume the chance of COVID-19 spreading as a result of the instrument was incredibly low. Even so, the interactive element of the piano during this *scene* does underscore the complex considerations communities must confront when determining the best ways to safely share joy amid dangerous circumstances. When choosing to engage in any behavior outside of their households during the pandemic, individuals in communities around the world had to weigh potential risks against potential benefits, which speaks to the significance of this *scene-act* ratio.

Perspective by Incongruity

Burke's (1935/1984) perspective by incongruity offers additional insight into the rhetorical significance of the piano created by Heggstad and the Vermillion Cultural Association. Traditionally, pianos are black or wooden with ivory keys. Like most instruments, pianos are most commonly found indoors – in homes, on stages, in performance halls. The Vermillion Street Piano subverted the common understanding of the piano as a classical instrument by challenging what constitutes an appropriate appearance and location. Its colorful, chipping paint starkly contrasted the unassuming, sleek and shiny appearance of most pianos. Its placement outdoors amid the unforgiving weather of South Dakota invited wear and tear, resulting in an out-of-tune musical experience that would be inappropriate in a traditional concert setting. Heggstad added color and whimsy to a rarely-ostentatious instrument and placed it in a location that would not be considered suitable for most instruments; by doing so, the artist invited the Vermillion community to engage with and view music in a new light. These incongruities suggest that art should and can be accessible, and they also inspired a set of community experiences untethered from traditional expectations. The contradictory *scene* and the surprising appearance of the piano shaped the resulting community experiences by encouraging passersby to reframe their understanding of art, move beyond their comfort zones, and informally participate in a greater theatrical event.

Discussion

The *scene-act* ratio evident in the case of the Vermillion Street Piano speaks to the materialistic (i.e., scenic) constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting impact on community action. The risks presented by COVID-19, the losses that communities experienced, and the initial uncertainty regarding SARS-CoV-2 transmission coalesced to present a *scene* that restricted movement and interaction to a great degree. The scenic constraints of the pandemic – paired with human responses such as fear and confusion – presided over any community activities taking place. While many activities in Vermillion were halted or drastically changed, the *act* of the Vermillion Street Piano emerged within this “container” (Burke, 1945/1962, p. 3); the experiences of making music and connecting with others in the piano's outdoor, public forum were defined and inspired by the *scene* of the pandemic. The piano functioned to unify its community and bring joy to passersby within these scenic limitations, and those experiences may have been more meaningful given the challenging context.

The significance of this *scene-act* ratio and its materialistic constraints extends beyond the Vermillion Street Piano, as the pandemic shaped countless other social activities around the world. For example, the dating landscape changed to emphasize video dates and conversations about boundaries (Aridi, 2021), with some dating apps like Bumble introducing badges that enabled users to signal their degree of COVID-19 safety precautions to potential dates (Moss,

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n.d.). Socialization among friends shifted to the virtual world, as well; from using browser extensions to watch shows and movies synchronously with others (Trepany, 2020) to delivering humorous presentations at virtual PowerPoint parties (Beck, 2020), friends found creative ways to adapt their socialization behaviors and stay connected from afar. Some friends and family retained an in-person element of their socialization, following a harm reduction approach; activities such as going on walks outside while wearing masks suggested a balance between the high risk of normal behaviors and the loneliness of complete isolation (Ducharme, 2020). Furthermore, terms like “quarantine pods” and “COVID-19 bubbles” arose as friends and families made selective exceptions to their physical distancing rules, with goals including preserving social contact with others and achieving a semblance of normalcy for young children (Moyer, 2020). In some instances, a pod approach was formalized by law; the U.K. government, for example, permitted only those who met certain criteria to form support bubbles during times of heightened risk (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). The scenic demands of the pandemic constrained social activities in substantial ways, highlighting the relevance of the materialist worldview demanded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even after the risks presented by the pandemic lessen, there will be long-term impacts of these materialistic challenges on social activities and community spaces. This is particularly apparent in the workplace and the world of education. During the pandemic, many organizations shifted to a remote work model for non-essential employees, and some companies – such as Spotify – committed to permanent flexibility for their employees’ work arrangements (Tayeb, 2021). Similarly, K-12 schools and higher education institutions turned to remote education, which – as St. George et al. (2021) observed – not only served as a short-term solution, but also revealed larger questions about how to make education more equitable, flexible, and responsive to students’ needs. Dan Domench of the American Association of School Administrators captured the lasting significance of the pandemic’s scenic demands: “‘There are a lot of positives that will happen because we’ve been forced into this uncomfortable situation.... The reality is that this is going to change education forever’” (as cited in St. George et al., 2021). The worldview of materialism is apt when considering the impacts of the pandemic on social activity, as the scenic constraints it introduced dramatically shaped many forms of social activity and promise to have a lasting effect on the ways we socialize, work, teach, learn, and interact.

An exploration of the *scene-act* ratio reveals that temporal and spatial contexts shaped and motivated the community experiences facilitated by the Vermillion Street Piano. The piano’s location outdoors at all times of day in downtown Vermillion opened up opportunities for creativity, community, destruction, and deterioration. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a motivating force behind the piano, prompting community members to seek unifying experiences where possible and lean into creative opportunities like those afforded by the Vermillion Street Piano. The healing nature of art and the risks presented by the pandemic coexisted at the site of the instrument. Finally, the incongruity of a piano residing outdoors and wearing bright paint challenged traditional notions of what constitutes art and how communities can make art more accessible. The Vermillion Street Piano defied expectations of traditional art, and examining this instrument as a theatrical artifact underscores its significance in the Vermillion community during a time of crisis.

As a Vermillion community member myself, I have pressed my ear against the window of my home to hear the late-night crowd belt out showtunes at the piano. I have paused on my walks downtown to sit and listen as teenagers play popular television theme songs. I have laughed as children plunk keys at random intervals and have noticed roses left on the piano by

strangers. At a time when our community was fragmented by the threat of COVID-19, the piano connected me to my community and inspired many of us to participate in experiences that – at least for a moment – offered us an escape from the present and pulled us into our community.

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