In November of 1993, I delivered the keynote address at a symposium on "Cleveland as a Center of Regional American Art." Held at The Cleveland Museum of Art and presented by the Cleveland Artists Foundation with the support of the Cleveland Foundation, this was a watershed event for several reasons.

First, of course, was the theme: art in Cleveland. Although William Milliken, the former director of the CMA who organized the first May Shows to promote local art back in 1919, had believed passionately in the interrelationship between place and artistic expression, that view was not widely held by later generations. Indeed, important museum professionals of our own era—the 1960s and '70s and '80s—espoused with equal fervor the notion that great art transcended geography, nationality, and all such parochial concerns (albeit it didn't hurt the reputation of a given city to have a world-class collection). Art was universal in the electronic network of images Marshall McLuhan had dubbed "the global village." But the topic of the 1993 symposium held out hope that change was in the wind—that, after all, there might be art worth looking at made in Cleveland by Clevelanders.

The second fascinating thing about the symposium was the roll call of speakers. There were curators from large and small museums, from local museums, from museums not primarily concerned with art or with American art, from centers for contemporary art. There were women—more women than men, in fact. People of color. Art historians from big, research-oriented universities, from colleges, art schools, and community colleges. From other states and nations. The cast of characters suggested a new diversity in the art community, or rather, among those empowered to interpret art on behalf of that community. It suggested that questions of localism and art mattered across a broad spectrum of class, gender, race, and place.

And then there were the topics the speakers chose to address. Pottery. Photography. Pictorial advertisements. Glass. African-American art, made in a settlement house. A privately commissioned mural in a domestic setting. Toys. Oh, and almost as an afterthought, oil paintings in museums. I was asked to address the symposium because, in the early 1970s, under the auspices of the Cleveland Public Library, I had undertaken a massive inventory of New Deal project art of the 1930s: the published results of that study included Cleveland ceramics, toys, photos, glass, murals in public buildings, work by women and proud members of ethnic minorities—and a few oil paintings as well. Today, almost twenty years after my examination of life and art in Cleveland during the Great Depression, the pluralism and diversity I revered in that art were back on the agenda again.

In my exhortation to the 1993 symposium—less a conference paper than a meditation on the meaning of place and one's attachment to it—I noted that American popular culture is currently fascinated by the local scene. Not Cleveland, perhaps, but Cicely, Alaska (fictional setting of TV's Northern Exposure), Rome, Wisconsin (Picket Fences), and Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegone. What all these venues have in common is a pungent pluralism. The smallest town, cloaked in an atmosphere of placid domesticity, harbors scores of "characters," one more interesting and peculiar than the next. Entertainments like these celebrate differences and the wild outbursts of creativity through which individualism is expressed. But it is the place that creates community out of differences. The sense of being together, here. Or topophilia, the common love of place. When Rodney King looked into the television cameras and asked "Why can't we all just get along?" he was pointing out the need for the kind of tolerance America's new regionalism covertly espouses.

Twentieth-century regionalism began with the novel, with books like Sinclair Lewis' satiric Main Street of 1920. Against a background of growing international sophistication, Lewis made fun of his Midwestern main street settings for fostering narrowness and provincialism. But the specificity of place can also create understanding, sympathy, and respect. And that is my hope for this collection of the papers presented at the Cleveland Artists Foundation symposium of 1993. May our reading make us more tolerant. May we begin to realize that many segments of the community have points of view worth considering, art worth looking at. That art in Cleveland touches our lives in ways too powerful to ignore.