

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

INROADS: The Intersection of Art & Civic Dialogue

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Begin with art, because art tries to take us outside ourselves. It is a matter of trying to create an atmosphere and context so conversation can flow back and forth and we can be influenced by each other.

— W.E.B. DuBois

Artists and cultural organizations have devoted much creative energy to the concept of community development and the realization of community. They have championed cultural development and cultural policy equal in value to other aspects of civic life. They have helped advance civic goals related to urban design, economic development, youth development and downtown and neighborhood revitalization. The arts have called up a sense of humanity to deepen understanding around persistent social issues of race, economic inequity and identity. In the myriad and interrelated dimensions of community life — social, civic, cultural, political — the flow of conversation back and forth is essential to understanding, decision making and accountability. Open and meaningful public dialogue is a critical means to any and all community-development ends.

Dialogue or dialogic processes have long been integral to the creative methodologies of foundational community-based artists such as Liz Lerman, John O'Neal and Judy Baca. These artists and others involve community members in defining and executing, to varying degrees, the content and form of their work. Many, including Suzanne Lacy and "new genre public artists," view the public process inherent in their work, which includes dialogue, as an aesthetic dimension of making art.

The Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) is an example of this principle in action. ADI, a four-year program of Americans for the Arts supported by The Ford Foundation, is grounded in three connected ideas:

- Art is vital to society.
- Civic dialogue is vital to democracy.
- Both create unique opportunities for understanding and exchange.

The arena of practice that the Animating Democracy Initiative has termed "arts-based civic dialogue" is not new. Nor is arts-based civic dialogue in itself a movement, but rather part of a continuum of community-based practice and civically engaged cultural work that engendered significant public discourse on issues of consequence, such as civil rights, war, AIDS, globalization and more.

ADI's focus on "civic dialogue" is inspired by these precedents and by a loosely defined and growing civic movement in the United States, the proponents of which observe that democracy, in its current form in the U.S., does not inspire participation by its citizens. As offered by Martha L. McCoy and Patrick L. Scully in a recent essay for the National Civic Review, to expand and deepen civic engagement will require a variety of opportunities. The processes of dialogue and deliberation are key forms. [1] In another forum, McCoy, who heads the Study Circles Resource Center, a national organization devoted to communitywide dialogue on a range of contemporary issues, observed that "the arts world is rarely mentioned in the world of civic engagement. That can and should change." For some examples of the ways artists are using civic dialogue, it is useful to explore ADI in detail. (*Please see sidebar for ADI's working definition of dialogue.*)

As part of the Animating Democracy Initiative, 32 organizations are examining the nature and demands of this "arts-based civic dialogue" work, to better understand what role cultural organizations can and should play in this exchange. They are grappling with issues and

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

obstacles, experimenting with approaches, and testing the initiative's assumption that civic dialogue and art can each be mutually enhanced when the two are thoughtfully brought together.

Drawing significantly on the experience of projects within the Animating Democracy Initiative to date, as well as a broader sphere of community-based cultural work, this essay considers what value art and humanities (including historic conservation, preservation and documentary work) can uniquely bring to discourse on important civic issues. It shares some of what the Animating Democracy Initiative is learning about the opportunities and challenges of this arena of work, and how ADI's thinking is evolving regarding the role of the arts in civic dialogue.

What does arts-based civic dialogue look like?

When Flint Youth Theatre began planning for a compelling new play addressing the national problem of school violence, they had no idea that in the process of developing the project, their own community would experience a devastating elementary school shooting. A year after the tragedy, ". . . My Soul to Take," written by Artistic Director and playwright William Ward, became a focal point for theater-goers and community members to revisit this persistent and painful issue. The play, atypical of most youth theater in its nonlinear, collage style and its treatment of the subject, captured a swirl of opinions surrounding the shooting. Over several months, a diverse set of dialogue opportunities, organized by Flint Youth Theatre and collaborating education, neighborhood crime-prevention and community organizations, aimed to coalesce fragmented efforts to address school violence. Over 100 community members met in small Study Circles groups to consider causes, effects and options for action. Youth explored dimensions of the issue through participation in process drama workshops, facilitated by artist Gillian Eaton, and through curriculum-based efforts related to their experience of the play. The Pied Piper (the play's central metaphor) and the question implored through the voices of children, "Can't somebody do something?" became a call to reinvigorate community dialogue and move toward action on this pressing issue.

Flint Youth Theatre's ADI project offers one example of many possible approaches to structuring and implementing arts-based civic dialogue. Here, dialogue was integral to the process of creating the play, as the script was developed directly from and inspired by the words and

Notes on Dialogue

For ADI's purposes, *civic dialogue* refers specifically to public (not just private) dialogue in which people discuss civic issues, policies or decisions of consequence to their lives, communities and society. In *arts-based civic dialogue*, the artistic process and/or the art or humanities presentation provides a key focus or catalyst for public dialogue on the issue. Opportunities for dialogue are embedded in or connected to the arts experience.

The initiative is guided by the following basic definitions of dialogue from the civic dialogue field. ADI's definition derives from the Study Circles Resource Center (www.studycircles.org). Dialogue is a purposeful process in which two or more parties with differing viewpoints work toward common understanding in an open-ended, (usually) face-to-face format. Drawing on the work of sociologist Daniel Yankelovich, author of "The Magic of Dialogue,"* three qualities of dialogue distinguish it from debate or discussion:

- Dialogue allows *assumptions* to be brought out into the open and encourages participants to *suspend judgment* in order to foster understanding and break down obstacles.
- Dialogue seeks to create *equality* among participants. Certain conditions can be created to even the playing field for participants with various levels of information about the issue, experience in public forums, real or perceived positions of power or authority, and to help build the trust and climate of safety for deep dialogue.
- Dialogue aims for a greater understanding of others' viewpoints through *empathy*. In dialogue, multiple perspectives are invited to the table and people are encouraged to voice them.

* Yankelovich, Daniel. *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

views of actual participants in the process drama workshops. With local partners and educators, dialogue was also planned and facilitated in conjunction with the production.

On the island of Hawaii, residents of the rural region of Kohala deliberated how best to restore a statue of King Kamehameha I, a hero revered as the indigenous unifier of the Hawaiian islands and native son to Kohala. Should the statue be restored to the mainland artist's original intent of gold and bronze finish, or should it be repainted in life-like colors, thereby continuing a longstanding community tradition? Through the respectful collaboration of conservator Glenn Wharton, the Hawaii Alliance for Arts Education and Kohala community leaders and cultural practitioners such as Raylene Lancaster, a multiplicity of gatherings and activities were designed to engage local residents in the decision-making process. Drawing from both indigenous Hawaiian and Euro-American traditions of community engagement and public discourse, activities included hula ki'i (image dance puppetry), "talk story," consultation with kupuna (elders), a high-school debate with public forum, and an opinion ballot. Through these activities, larger issues of history, identity, ownership, development, tourism and preservation were raised, and consensus was eventually reached to continue the community's practice of painting the statue. In this example, the King Kamehameha I statue, a pre-existing work of art, became the focal point for civic dialogue and offered an entry to a larger set of issues; at the same time, art making or cultural practice that was dialogic in structure was utilized to educate, stimulate and engage community participation.

The Andy Warhol Museum's exhibition, "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America," offers a very different model of arts-based civic dialogue. With tensions heightened by a spate of racially motivated killings in Pittsburgh, the Warhol Museum presented a touring collection of photographic prints and postcards documenting the history of lynching in the U.S. in order to create a platform for dialogues on race in the city. The museum offered space for community groups to hold meetings and, in partnership with the YMCA's Center for Race Relations, daily dialogues for the public were scheduled in which artist/educators led opportunities in the galleries to help visitors reflect on their experience. These and a range of other public and educational programs drew local media attention, which, in turn, prompted further public discourse. "Without Sanctuary" at the Warhol provoked multiple and intersecting ripples of dialogue among visitors to the exhibition, between the museum and partners, within a large community planning committee, as well as inside the institution among staff, board and artist/educators. Partnership between the art museum and the Center for Race Relations was essential to dialogue efforts having a credible presence in the community.

In its three-year "Faith-Based Theater Project," Cornerstone Theater Company, in close collaboration with the National Conference for Community and Justice/Los Angeles region (NCCJ, a dialogue organization with expertise in interfaith work and experience using theater arts to engage participants), is creating innovative merged forms of art and dialogue. The project includes a series of original plays created with members of faith-based institutions and interfaith communities in L.A., addressing how faith both unites and divides society. A veteran in the field of community-based theater, Cornerstone, as a rule, uses dialogue and community engagement in the creative development of its work. But this project allows Cornerstone to explore dialogue approaches both in conjunction with the finished productions, and embedded in the aesthetic and structure of the plays themselves. Cornerstone's boldest experiment yet in integrating art and civic dialogue may be its new interactive production, "ZONES (or, Where does your soul live and is there sufficient parking?)." "ZONES" casts the audience as participants in a fictional community meeting, and engages them in dialogue activities during, and integral to, the show. Written by Cornerstone ensemble playwright Peter Howard, who is also a staff member with NCCJ, the play is highly scripted but has five distinctive interactive

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

dialogue components. Each sequence is motivated and facilitated by one or more characters in the play and usually comes out of the character's attempt to get the audience to side with his or her point of view. In reflecting upon audiences' experience of *ZONES*, company members and NCCJ dialogue specialists believe that the integration of actual dialogue into the play gave audiences an unusual opportunity to act on their emotions — immediately and communally.

The efforts of these four cultural organizations highlight just a few of the many possibilities for what arts-based civic dialogue can look like. In some cases, the art or cultural practice includes dialogue in process or product; in other cases, the art is not necessarily dialogic in itself, but offers fertile ground for planning dialogue activities in conjunction, or sparks a community's desire or need to engage an issue in a new way. These projects demonstrate the potency of the arts and humanities to illuminate civic issues in their communities. More specifically, they aim to get people talking together, in a focused and purposeful way, about issues that affect their lives, in hopes of better understanding the complexities, dimensions and implications of those issues.

How do the arts and humanities contribute to civic dialogue and broader public discourse?

Maggie Herzig of the Public Conversations Project offers the idea that art might be viewed as an important *participant* in a broader process of civic dialogue. As a participant, it can and should be its most authentic and compelling self. Art might sometimes be a provocateur, a mediator of ideas, or might even put forward a particular perspective in relation to an issue. Herzig explains, "[Art] will inspire and interest some people at some times. It will move people. It will be confusing or even a bit uncomfortable at times. It will invite people to reflect in new ways on their own perspectives. It will attempt to honor more than one perspective but it will not be perfect in this regard — it couldn't be. It will be offered in a spirit of authentic expression, and if it is received in a way that makes it hard for someone else to participate, it will ask that person to hang in there, say what's hard, and participate anyway. It will provoke but with love. It will say what it says then leave space — lots of space — for others." Projects within the Animating Democracy Initiative are unfolding to reveal and reinforce a range of ways in which arts and humanities can participate in, help create conditions conducive to, and embody meaningful and productive civic dialogue.

Art as the SPARK for civic dialogue

Comparable to the way that study guides are used as a basis for dialogue, art can be the focal point that explores dimensions of a civic issue, the questions surrounding it and multiple or alternative perspectives on it. Out North Contemporary Art House is working with video artist Stephan Mazurek, choreographer/dancer Peter Carpenter and juggler/performance artist Sarah Feldman, artists known for their provocative and outspoken work on issues of homosexual identity and experience, to produce videos of their work. The videos will be used as the basis for discussion within tens of small group dialogues throughout Anchorage. For this project, titled "Understanding Neighbors," the artists interviewed local people whose views and attitudes widely vary about the role of same-sex couples in society. These perspectives are considered and included in the video works, which will provide a consistent reference for the simultaneous small-group dialogues.

The Jewish Museum's recent and controversial exhibit, "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art," was perhaps most successful as a catalyst through which the Jewish community contemplated and more openly discussed previously taboo questions, such as "Who can speak for the Holocaust?" and re-examined familiar questions, such as "How do we remember?" That the Jewish Museum, a venerated institution in the Jewish community, would venture this inquiry

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

with controversial works of art gave it significant weight. Similar to the Warhol's exhibition of "Without Sanctuary," extensive media attention broadened the scope and amount of public discourse, while panels, large public dialogues and daily dialogues in the museum offered opportunities to more deeply engage difficult questions.

Where others have been unsuccessful or, for whatever reasons, are not taking initiative, the arts and humanities can sometimes be a catalyst for liberating a stuck dialogue, mobilizing different players or moving people to take up an issue. Nonlinear structures, challenging juxtapositions and ambiguity in art can help reveal the assumptions of a community or individual. Even provocative or controversial art can offer compelling opportunities for thoughtfully planned dialogues, in collaboration with specialists, and can open up civic issues in vital and valuable ways.

Art as an *INVITATION* to participate

Art can bring people to the conversation who might not otherwise participate. It can bring forward the voices of those often silenced or left out of public discourse. It can bring together groups of people with divergent viewpoints who might not readily agree to talk or work together in other settings. And it can help create empathy among participants, aiding people to suspend judgment and hear each other in new ways.

In Portland, Maine, the Center for Cultural Exchange is working in close collaboration with the Somali, Congolese and Sudanese communities to address divisions within each and to dispel misinformation, prejudice and stereotyped viewpoints that impact public perceptions of refugee communities. Negotiating which popular contemporary and traditional music and dance forms to present is a dialogue process that invites Africans in Maine to determine their own cultural representation. The intricacy of intragroup dialogue also reveals the diversity within a community often assumed to be monolithic from the outside.

Community organizer Sharon Hayden, in Kohala, Hawaii, notes that the dialogue activities around the restoration of the King Kamehameha I statue have affected the degree of community participation in local civic processes. "Including so many on some level — either by decision making, the asking of opinion, or in the education setting — does empower people to have the confidence to express themselves in other arenas, such as the new general plan for our county and the many development issues we are now facing," says Hayden.

Artists and dialogue specialists also recognize that the use of story can be a powerful invitation to civic dialogue. John O'Neal's development of Story Circles has certainly demonstrated the power of personal narrative, which his production company Junebug continues to explore and utilize in the "Color Line Project" — a performance and community story-collecting project that revitalizes Civil Rights Movement history as a valued and illuminating context for current issues of race. In Alaska, a statewide tour of Perseverance Theater's adaptation of "Moby Dick" engaged a diverse citizenry in dialogue about contentious issues of subsistence rights, the urban-rural divide and the struggles between economic and environmental interests. For Perseverance, focusing on story was essential to the production and to civic engagement. At a recent convening, ADI Liaison Abel Lopez noted, "If you used the word dialogue in Barrow, nobody would go. Stories invited people in." Dialogue Coordinator Susan McInnis discovered that she needed to approach organizing gatherings in a completely different way than originally planned. "My assumption was that our state trembles with these issues," she said, "but very seldom do we talk to each other about them, native to non-native, person to person. Throughout the state there are the official people, the powerful people, who talk, and everyone else is silenced. ... The successful moments were when people told stories, and the stories led into dialogue."

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

Art as *SPACE* for civic dialogue

The Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery, Wisconsin, is a locus for community cultural activity with a track record of attracting a large percentage of its rural community population for its arts programs. In fact, the center drew approximately 65 percent of the entire community for an interdisciplinary program of music, theater, photography and poetry presentations linked to dialogue about local water-conservation issues. The center's surveys showed that audiences overwhelmingly came to the performances and exhibits because of the art and not the issue. But the familiarity of cultural setting and enthusiasm for the art translated readily to a civic purpose. Audiences went home realizing both personal and community benefits afforded by the art to discuss and better understand the water issue.

More than just physical environment, the arts and humanities can offer psychological, experiential and intellectual space conducive to reflection and discussion. St. Augustine's Church and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum are partnering in dialogue activities related to the restoration of the church's Slave Galleries — cramped rooms above the balcony of the church where African-American congregants were segregated during the 19th century. They are exploring the meaning and use of the Slave Galleries as "space" — physical, historical and metaphorical — for dialogues about the experience of marginalization for multiple, co-existing communities on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Dialogue specialists Tammy Bormann and David Campt are training a diverse group of 30 community preservationists to use the Slave Galleries as a reference point for dialogue within and among their own constituencies. Historic sites such as these can serve as potent symbolic spaces that enable connections to be drawn between various histories and current experiences, to help communities find common ground and better understand difference.

In Intermedia Arts' "Midtown Greenway" project, artists are working with various Minneapolis neighborhood residents (including low-income youth and families, newly arrived Latino immigrants, homeless youth and recently acclimated Hmong women), exploring the question, "What is safe space?" Youth and adult community members, for example, walked Greenway neighborhoods with Victor Yepez, one of five artists on the project, collecting found materials for making "Power Objects." Following the field trips, they discussed symbolism inherent in the found materials, notions of safety, community and art. They then created individual and collaborative sculptures that reflected values important to a sense of community well-being. These works, exhibited for the community, became a focal point for furthering conversation about safety — both in terms of participating in the process of the Greenway development and living in a neighborhood changed by that process.

People engaged in public conversation about difficult issues need to feel safe enough to honestly express their views and to say and hear things that are sometimes upsetting and painful. Cultural organizers and dialogue specialists generally agree that dialogue, like art, is inherently risky. Understanding the conditions that make people feel unsafe or safe is paramount to deep and meaningful dialogue.

Balancing power dynamics among participants is difficult but essential. Language itself can sometimes be an issue, as well as the physical space and historical alliances of the hosting institution, and perceived cultural norms. For example, who feels safe to engage in the space of an art museum, and who does not? How can a cultural institution or dialogue partner create a safe space, in which all voices can be heard equitably, to discuss very unsafe histories with potentially unsafe contemporary implications? Dialogue consultant Luz Guerra reflects, "When I do discussions between youth and adults, I sometimes have an eight-hour workshop with the adults alone to work through their own issues before bringing them together, and to train the

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

adults not to correct what young people say and change their words, but to reflect what has been said. You have to teach people to yield their power." Several ADI projects are experimenting with intragroup dialogues that seek to help clarify each particular group's own relationship to an issue, and to empower that group's voice before engaging in a broader inter-group dialogue. Artist Armando Gutierrez of Minneapolis emphasizes that a safe space does not exist "until you identify the culture of the group and lay that as common ground for the dialogue to begin."

Art as a *FORM* of dialogue

There are many ways in which art itself is dialogic. Key elements of dialogue can be identified in various artistic processes or in particular ways of encountering art. Museum curators within ADI have pointed out that there is always an internal dialogue that occurs between a work of art and the viewer. Also, private dialogues between viewers or audience members are frequently sparked by experiences with art. Though difficult to measure, the mere presence of art in society has ripple effects that contribute to broad civic discourse. But some approaches to art are more deliberative or explicit in embodying dialogue.

Certain performance traditions are dialogic in structure. City Lore's intergenerational "Poetry Dialogues" project taps dialogic forms of oral art from African, Filipino and Middle Eastern cultures, and introduces them as mentors to the emerging work of young hip-hop poets and spoken-word artists. Master elder traditional poets are teamed with young artists to explore self-defined civic issues and the roots of their poetic forms. The City Lore project fosters dialogue among generations, cultures and the aesthetic forms themselves.

Participatory forms of art, such as community-based theater or dance or interactive performance art, may utilize dialogue in process or production. Similar to Cornerstone's explorations in "ZONES," The Critical Art Ensemble's work (one piece of which was performed as part of the Henry Art Gallery's exhibit, "Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics") sets up faux scientific experiments or studies that engage passers-by or audience members in encounters designed to prompt interaction about issues of biogenetic engineering. The ensemble "scientists" often put the audience members in the position to collectively make a choice or decision, without which the performance cannot continue. The resulting conversations are integral to the meaning and form of the piece.

For artists such as Michael Rohd of Sojourn Theater, dialogue is implied and recreated by the multiple perspectives represented in the text that emerges from a series of interviews with community members. In partnership with the Council for the Arts of Greater Lima, Ohio, Rohd is interviewing urban and rural stakeholders in issues of trust and local leadership, creating monologues from the individual dialogues of the interview process. The juxtaposition of multiple voices in the finished work creates another level of "dialogue," as different perspectives play off each other to reveal assumptions about "characters" and points of view in the city and surrounding areas.

Just as juxtapositions can create new meanings, creative distance can allow participants to hear each other in new ways. Process drama, a British form of experiential improvisation and role-play, engages groups in active speculation and reflection on issues suggested by a "pre-text" or dilemma put forward by the leader. "Dialogue" during Gillian Eaton's process drama workshops in Flint probed social values, morals and conditions related to youth violence without explicitly addressing the community's own tragedy. Using the Pied Piper of Hamelin pre-text (which later translated to the central metaphor of ". . . My Soul to Take)," participants took the role of townspeople arguing with the Piper about his payment, and among themselves about who was to blame for the tragedy of their lost children. According to FYT organizers, process drama was

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

able to take the discussion into the imaginative realm, "distancing" participants from the harsh realities of the topic and enabling them to express "in role" feelings and ideas that may have been too difficult to share otherwise.

Metaphor can shine light on particular aspects of an issue, make unexpected depth visible, or bring into focus what is yet unclear or previously unexplored. In Urban Bush Women's "Hair Stories" project, company members lead a series of dialogues called "hair parties" that alternate between bursts of performance and open group discussion. The frame of talking about hair allows UBW to invite participants to engage in underlying issues of race, class and history, via their own personal experiences.

Similarly, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's multiyear national initiative, "Hallelujah," asks communities around the country, "What are you in praise of?" Allowing the primary metaphor for each production to emerge from story sharing and dialogue among participants in the art-making process, the company has discovered Hallelujahs such as "In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found," referencing an African-American district in Detroit that was decimated to make room for a freeway in the 1960s, and "In Praise of Constancy in the Midst of Change," a dance that touched on topics related to the new Civil Union law in Vermont. Dance Exchange is working to document the ways in which dialogue is inherent in their process, and has raised intriguing questions about the possibility and qualities of nonverbal dialogue. Humanities Director John Borstel has asked, "What if the process doesn't always look like civic dialogue, but has civic impact?" In line with important criteria for dialogue, involving community members in making dances together can balance power dynamics, challenge assumptions and create empathy.

Issues and Inquiry

In the course of the initiative, we are discovering that the pairing of art and civic dialogue can be a challenging, sometimes difficult, hybrid. As ADI participants approach arts-based civic dialogue efforts with deliberateness and specific intent, many philosophical and practical challenges begin to crystallize. Questions and insights recur about what makes dialogue "civic," what constitutes safe space and how art maintains its integrity among these concerns. The following is an introduction to just two of the issues and areas of inquiry that have emerged as artists and dialogue specialists have been working together.

Neutrality and Multipartiality

Most organizers in the dialogue world assert that a "neutral" space to hold dialogue assures individuals that different and conflicting perspectives will be encouraged and heard in a fair and balanced way. Likewise, the dialogue facilitator should maintain an unbiased relationship to the issue while in that role, even if he or she personally holds a particular view.

These notions of neutrality, when encountering the art world, have met with some challenge, both philosophically and in practice. They make many artists and cultural leaders nervous. Some question whether neutrality is ever possible. Others ask if it is even desirable in art. What if the strongest aesthetic choice is not to balance all voices equally? What happens to the artist's voice? Artists fear they may be asked to abandon point of view or be so inclusive of every perspective that the aesthetic integrity of the work is compromised. Some artists choose to develop work that is deliberately provocative or confrontational. But what are the responsibilities that go along with provocation? What aesthetic choices could support or inadvertently undermine civic dialogue?

Dialogue specialists and artists participating in the Animating Democracy Initiative have thought hard about these questions. Probably counter to most of her colleagues, whom she believes

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

would be skeptical about using art that has a strong point of view, Maggie Herzig's idea of the art as "participant" in dialogue responded directly to these questions. "I don't see that art has to be flat and inauthentic. All the art has to do is be a respectful participant — represent its truth, but not slap others with it."

Patricia Romney, dialogue specialist and clinical/organizational psychologist, has introduced the idea of "multipartiality" from the field of family therapy, drawing from the work of Ivan Boszormeny-Nagy. [2] When applied to dialogue and facilitation, Romney explains, "it means working on behalf of everyone in the room. It means not taking sides, but being on *everyone's* side, in terms of a constructive and equitable or just resolution or dialogue. To achieve multipartiality, one must metaphorically "step up" to the metalevel of dialogue. That is, that level (perhaps an aerial view) from which one can see the shared and common interests of the participants."

San Diego Repertory Theater wrestled with these questions from all angles as it used dialogue toward the creation of a new play that explores economic and human exchange — including transportation, trade, employment, migration, language, culture and prejudice — at the border of the U.S. and Mexico. The project explored the play's central question, "Should we tear down the fence that separates San Diego and Tijuana, or should we build it higher?" Artistic Director Sam Woodhouse questioned how to build multiple viewpoints into a story without diminishing the work's ultimate point of view: "Will we be able to present enough diversity where everyone gets their minute and still have a good dramatic story?"

Choreographer Dora Arreola pointed out that, even if the script successfully included many perspectives, neutrality is still impossible because a bias already exists in the aesthetic — in the conceit and structure of the piece and in the imaginary events of the narrative. "Nuevo California," by playwright Bernardo Solano, is set in the future, at an imaginary time when most of the fence has already been taken down; only one piece remains on the beach, and the action surrounds whether or not the final piece should be removed. Arreola's comments suggest that, though subtle, the artist's bias is projected in the imaginary world of the play. Ultimately, she and Solano found Romney's notion of multipartiality useful. Although, personally, the artists believe that the fence should be removed, they chose not to directly take that position. Nuances and conflicts within the characters were developed to enable viewers to question more deeply and to draw their own conclusions. Arreola explains, "[It's a piece about two or more perspectives about the border] ... The multipartiality is in the description of the situation through the complexity of the behavior of the characters. If not, we have conflict. We can do conflict very easily ... If the complexity is not there, there can be no multipartiality."

Mary Grisco, a Community Coordinating Committee member for Out North's project, "Understanding Neighbors," which incorporates video art pieces reflecting three artists' work into communitywide small-group dialogues, believes an organization can hold a position on an issue but still be fair in facilitating open dialogue. Out North Contemporary Art House is known in Anchorage for the pro-gay-rights position of its leaders, and recognizes this as a potential obstacle to participation for people who hold contrary beliefs. Out North refocused its project, from a goal to influence public opinion and policy about same-sex marriage legislation to building understanding about same-sex couples in society among people whose divergent value systems rarely, if ever, bring them together. An intensive planning process considered the overall conservative attitudes of the community around issues of same-sex couples, concerns of clergy through the partnership with the Interfaith Council of Anchorage, a recent local controversy fanned by media and local political leaders around a gay exhibition, and Out North's perceived position around the issue. Convinced that any effort directed toward action would

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

dissuade people from choosing to participate, the project's planners moved toward dialogue that would enable people to share opinion and stories in a nonjudgmental environment and to build bridges of understanding. In this context, Grisco asserts that the issue is "not about being neutral, but about not being in charge." A coordinating committee representing three partner organizations was established and is actively and seriously seeking the most diverse perspectives on the issue. Pulling in community partners and empowering the committee, whose members hold a range of views on the issue, "got us to be seen as fair, but not as neutral. We're not looking for neutrality, but for a level playing field.

The Personal within the Public

What makes dialogue "civic?"

Arts leaders and civic dialogue specialists in the Animating Democracy Initiative have been frustrated by two contrasting observations in their public dialogue work. Cultural leaders acknowledge that the arts are highly effective in bringing forward compelling and illuminating personal stories and experiences, but frequently do not move beyond the exchange of stories to dialogue focused on the broader civic dimensions of an issue. Civic-dialogue specialists, on the other hand, note that in more conventional public settings, personal or emotional dimensions of an issue are typically denied a presence, based on a belief that people need hard information, attitudes surveys and technical data to support positions, in order to have intelligent and informed dialogue.

From experience, however, facilitators recognize that it is almost impossible to talk about the civic realm of certain issues without talking about the personal realm. Most people move fluidly between, without necessarily distinguishing when they are speaking from which. On issues of race, class, sexuality, violence, artist Marty Pottenger points out, "the emotional hurt can keep people from doing their best thinking and being in a place where transformation is possible."

Art is often effective because it explores what is unresolved or in conflict between people or even within an individual. Art can humanize civic issues, bringing forward the human impact and implications. Often this is an emotional journey and it can be difficult to switch from the intense emotion of the artistic experience to the rational response expected in civic discourse.

How do we facilitate the transition from heart space, the personal experience that art evokes, to the head space and collective experience of civic dialogue? How might dialogue facilitators work more effectively with the passions and emotions inherent in artistic work as a point of departure for dialogue? A better understanding of the relationship between feeling and thinking in public discourse would help, as well as rethinking the assumption that emotion is private, not public, or that public dialogue equals rational dialogue.

The personal cannot be separated from civic life, in that the personal is a lens through which public issues become relevant and comprehensible. ADI would venture that effective, meaningful, transformational, personal dialogue is possible without ever reaching the civic realm. But effective, meaningful, transformational *civic* dialogue is *not* possible without some degree of meaningful personal dialogue. This is why art is important to the process. The question is, however, how to use the power of the personal carefully and purposefully, to bring civic dimensions forward. The challenge is to facilitate movement from "my personal story" to a deeper understanding of collective implications, to a capacity for communication in a diverse public realm, to *civic dialogue*. From expressing to *being heard*, and hearing in return. From sharing to *contributing*.

The Big Picture and the Long View

Community Arts Network

Reading Room

The arts and humanities have amply shown that they can bring about "moments" of dialogue. But artists and cultural organizations need to consider when and where, among the streams of discourse about a civic issue, that arts-based civic dialogue is occurring and how it may have the most meaningful impact. To situate cultural work in civic discourse means knowing what conversations are already happening, who is engaged and who is leading. Which approaches are seen as constructive or destructive? How is the media covering the issue? Have there been attempts in the past to have dialogue? What happened that was useful or not, healing or dividing? What purpose can the art serve in this context? What purpose would dialogue serve and what could the arts or humanities offer to support that purpose? Who are the partners or leaders with whom a cultural organization can connect to position the cultural work appropriately in context of other efforts and to create trust, safe or equitable space, and authentic connection with various constituents?

Richard Harwood of the Harwood Institute observes, "people think about public concerns, not in isolated bites, but in inter-related webs of concerns." [3] He describes layers of public life — from private to quasi-official to civic to official policy — in which debate, discussion and dialogue happen. Harwood suggests that change occurs in communities as discourse is invigorated along this continuum. Cultural organizations and artists may have particular value in influencing private streams of discourse and by intersecting with various civic spaces, but also in making connections between these different areas of the continuum.

Given the demands on cultural organizations to do this work effectively, some may wonder when to take up civic issues and if they, as cultural organizations, are best suited to lead. Within ADI, some groups, for whom civically engaged work is not necessarily central to their mission, have especially raised these concerns. For ADI, the range of participating cultural groups — from community-based organizations to large institutions — suggests that any cultural organization with authentic intent and careful planning can contribute vitally to civic discourse. The longer-term question of who should sustain attention around the issue is even more challenging. If a cultural organization has, in fact, instigated dialogue around an issue, what responsibility does it have to sustain focus after the arts project is over? When the arts organization does not see itself as having capacity or interest to become a long-term champion of a specific civic issue, partnering with community organizations becomes more important for ensuring sustainability.

Art may connect to civic issues in different ways according to a spectrum of desired outcomes, from making social comment, to engaging participants in dialogue, to stimulating social change. In the context of a sustained activist-art movement, in which action leading to policy change is the goal, many ask, is dialogue enough? Action or change may indeed be a desirable outgrowth of dialogue. ADI offers, however, that depending on where participants are entering the stream of civic discourse, there are a number of possible interventions and contributions that arts-based civic dialogue can make to have substantial impact. If the public takes notice of an issue, if people are talking, listening and being heard in ways not previously possible, if the stakeholders are finally at the table together in a respectful, equitable environment — these are important outcomes and sometimes even breakthroughs. A value of arts-based civic dialogue is this kind of *orchestration* of voices, interests and exchanges that can illuminate issues, advance understanding and have a lasting, cumulative impact over time.

Bliss Brown of Imagine Chicago, an organization that employs art and creativity as a fundamental aspect of its civic-action work, reflected after an ADI convening, "What makes civic life possible, even exciting, in my view, is that it inspires and harnesses civic imagination, that new things are constructed in the 'in-between' space which dialogue creates, and that we are

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given the opportunity to transcend our own personal boundaries and concerns in the service of something larger." ADI puts forth the proposition that art creates opportunities for transcendence, suspension or transformation, too, and that the "in-between" space of the art and civic dialogue exchange is ripe with possibility and deserves further exploration. Continued exchange between cultural and civic workers has the potential to contribute vitality and opportunity, providing fertile ground for animating democracy.

NOTES

1. McCoy, Martha L. and Patrick L. Scully, "Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civic Engagement: What Kind of Talk Does Democracy Need?" *National Civic Review*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, forthcoming summer 2002.
2. Multipartiality is Romney's adaptation of Nagy's term multidimensional partiality discussed in his (1973) book *Invisible Loyalties: Reciprocity in Intergenerational Family Therapy*.
3. Harwood, Richard C. "The Public Realm: Where America Must Address its Concerns." The Harwood Group Series, Bethesda, Maryland: The Harwood Institute, vol. 1, issue 1, Jan. 1996.

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For further examples of arts-based civic dialogue, including all 32 ADI Lab projects, visit the [Animating Democracy Web site](#).

For links to many of the organizations mentioned in this article, visit the [CAN Reading Room](#) and look in the [Arts and Community](#) category.

