

Giving Voice: A Role for Museums in Civic Dialogue

BARBARA SCHAFFER BACON, PAM KORZA, AND PATRICIA E. WILLIAMS

Prepared for A Museums & Community Toolkit, Published by American Association of Museums, Copyright 2002.

As David Thelen wrote in “Learning Community: Creating the Civic Museum” (Museum News, May/June 2001), “We are living at a time when museums and other meaning-making institutions of popular education and culture are reconsidering their civic mission and practices, the places they seek, the ways they engage new partners and audiences, and, therefore, their priorities. Many believe that the health of these institutions depends on becoming more civically engaged with a range of communities.”

But how can museums achieve this civic mission? As Thelen states, museums are not the only organizations working to reinvent themselves as civically engaged institutions, and there is much that we can learn from our colleagues.

Launched in 1999 by Americans for the Arts, the Animating Democracy Initiative—like AAM’s Museums & Community Initiative—encourages cultural organizations to explore their civic role. This essay provides a broader sense of the spectrum of civic engagement available to museums—from incorporating a dialogue component into exhibit programming to an institutional exploration of a museum’s civic mission and goals. While the examples discussed below focus on programming, ADI has come to recognize that program-based dialogue is most successful when it is part of a museum-wide effort to become a civic institution.

There is a growing movement to reinvigorate civic dialogue as vital dimension of a healthy democracy, based on the premise that a democracy is animated by an informed public engaged in the issues affecting their daily lives. Civic dialogue plays an essential role in this process, giving voice to multiple perspectives and enabling people to develop more multifaceted, humane, and realistic views of complex issues and of each other. Yet opportunities for civic dialogue in this country have diminished in recent years, due mainly to polarization of opinion along ideological, racial, gender, and class lines; social structures that separate rich from poor and majorities from minorities; a sense of individual disempowerment; and the overwhelming nature of many of society’s problems. Perhaps most fundamentally, the fact that modern problems usually affect different people in different ways often places them outside of the traditional civic organizations, labor unions, and political parties that organized civic discourse in the past.

Through its Animating Democracy Initiative, Americans for the Arts aims to explore and enhance the potential of the arts and humanities to illuminate civic experience and to strengthen the role of arts and cultural institutions in civic discourse. The Animating Democracy Lab, a component of the initiative, supports 32 civic dialogue projects at several cultural institutions, including four museums. Individually and collectively, these diverse projects are advancing knowledge about the philosophical, practical, and social dimensions of arts-based civic dialogue. All over the country, museums and other cultural organizations are using arts and humanities resources to advance civic dialogue.

With the thoughtful and imaginative use of basic collection, preservation, exhibition, and education functions, museums can expand the debate on important contemporary issues by providing forums for civic dialogue. Through intentional and focused public discussions of the civic issues, policies, and decisions that affect people’s lives, museums can expand opportunity for democratic participation by encouraging broader, more diverse publics to give voice to the critical issues of our time.

WHAT IS CIVIC DIALOGUE?

The Study Circles Resource Center, a national organization devoted to community-wide dialogue on a range of contemporary issues, defines dialogue as 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. In *The Magic of Dialogue*, sociologist Daniel Yankelovich cites the characteristics that make dialogue so vital in a democracy. “Dialogue is distinguished from simple discussion and adversarial debate in several important ways,” he writes:

Dialogue encourages participants to *suspend judgment* and allow assumptions and preconceptions to be brought out into the open, in order to foster understanding and break down obstacles. It attempts to create *equality* among participants, seeking ways to even out inequalities in levels of information about the issue, experience in public forums, and real or perceived positions of power or authority. It encourages *empathy* by inviting *multiple perspectives* to the table and supporting their expression, thus facilitating a greater understanding of others’ viewpoints. Through these and other means, it seeks to build a climate of trust and safety, without which genuine dialogue cannot occur.

Civic dialogue brings these characteristics into the public realm.

WHAT ASSETS DOES A MUSEUM HAVE TO OFFER?

- *Individual objects or collection-based and special exhibitions* can provide a focal point for civic dialogue. “Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics,” a 2002 exhibition at the University of Washington’s Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, featured the work of artists responding to recent developments in the science of human genomics. As curators developed the exhibition, scientists worldwide were completing the map of the human genome. With that and Seattle’s own vigorous biogenetic industry and research activity as context, the Henry’s curators saw the exhibition as a prime opportunity to focus public attention on and deepen understanding of the social, ethical, and economic implications of biogenetics. Media coverage and visitor feedback suggest that the exhibition, public dialogue programs, and linked activities succeeded in raising consciousness and stimulating thought and discussion.
- *Educational guides and activities* can help participants find points of departure for inquiry and dialogue. The Henry—in conjunction with a dialogue advisor and educators from several local schools, and drawing on dialogues with members of the scientific community—developed an exceptional curriculum guide for teachers. The guide introduced concepts of dialogue and civic dialogue and provided issue-based resources teachers could use to prepare students for their visit. The Henry also adapted its Visual Thinking Strategies approach to gallery education, to move visitors from an exploration of the art to a discussion of genomics issues.
- *Complementary exhibitions* may offer a contemporary, historic, or global context, as well as contrasts and comparisons that can increase information and understanding around an issue. In 1997, staff at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Conn.—recognizing the city’s history included both the gun-manufacturing legacy of the Colt family and the escalating gun violence of recent years—asked artist Brad McCallum to help them illuminate the seriousness of the issue. McCallum created 228 custom-designed, symbolic manhole covers from tons of confiscated guns and an audio installation capturing stories of Hartford citizens affected by gun violence, the latter developed through interviews and dialogue. *Manhole Cover Project* was exhibited outside the museum (and, later, the manhole covers were installed in the streets of the city). Inside, the Wadsworth mounted an exhibition from its collection of the Colt family’s art treasures. The joint exhibition combined a historic reference and contemporary art to focus on a pressing current issue.
- *Museum galleries, meeting rooms, education facilities, and auditoria* are appropriate physical spaces for hosting dialogues, and also may offer the right contextual spaces as well. In spring 2002, the Jewish Museum, New

York, took a great risk with its own community when it presented “Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art,” a controversial exhibition that shifted focus from victims to perpetrators. Asking, “Who can speak for the Holocaust?” the exhibition tread morally ambiguous ground. Could another museum have mounted the exhibition and facilitated difficult dialogues within the Jewish community on this topic? Museum leaders believed that the institution’s venerated position within the Jewish community as well as its sensitivity to the issue and its stakeholders meant it could undertake this controversial exhibition responsibly. Beginning early in the process museum and community representatives met regularly to discuss exhibition concepts, including the identification of civic issues and key constituencies.

- *Professional expertise of staff* in areas of research, conservation, education, curation, promotion, or management may be of great benefit to other efforts in a community whose goal is civic dialogue. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, is lending its organizing and coalition-building skills, as well as its knowledge of historic sites of conscience, to the restoration of 19th-century slave galleries located in the nearby St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church. The museum is helping to develop training for community preservationists affiliated with the church and other ethnic, social, and religious institutions, which will use the slave galleries as a symbolic space for dialogue about persistent issues of marginalization in the neighborhood. Leaders in neighborhood organizations—including the Trust in God Baptist Church, Eldridge Street Project, United Neighborhood Houses, Good Ol’ Lower East Side, as well as the museum and the church’s Slave Galleries Committee—have been involved intensively in the project and also received training in facilitating dialogue. Many other community organizations—such as the Boys Club, synagogues, libraries, schools, and human service organizations—have participated in dialogues convened by these community preservationists.

ONE STORY: AN EXHIBIT INSPIRES A DIALOGUE ON RACE

The arts and humanities can reinvigorate dialogues that have reached an impasse, mobilize diverse players, or simply encourage people to take up a difficult issue. Talking about contentious themes and different people’s points of view can help reveal the assumptions of an individual or community and open a previously closed topic to fruitful discourse. Even provocative or controversial shows can lead to thoughtfully planned dialogues on civic issues that help communities in vital and valuable ways.

For example, Pittsburgh’s Andy Warhol Museum used a dialogue approach to engage community partners in the development of an exhibition and to advance dialogue on a key civic issue. Through its 2001 presentation of “Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America”—an exhibition of horrific images showing men and women being lynched—the museum aimed to create a platform for conversations about the city’s racial conflicts. With tensions running high after a spate of racially motivated killings, museum staff listened closely to community voices to create an environment in which people would feel safe engaging and discussing the disturbing photographs. They engaged a community advisory group and numerous religious and civic organizations to help plan the exhibit, provide extensive background material, and create discussion opportunities. They also conferred with colleagues at the New-York Historical Society, which had previously shown the exhibition.

The museum engaged stakeholders with connections to African-American communities, as well as schools, diverse community organizations, and a broad cross-section of individual community, religious, business, and political leaders. Staff tried to include organizations concerned with improving race relations in the planning and co-sponsoring of events, and held several meetings to talk about “Without Sanctuary,” listening to concerns and acting on advice. With a consciousness enabled through the Warhol’s partnership with the YWCA Center for Race Relations, stakeholders began to use the principles and practices of dialogue to navigate their differences and ideas.

The museum’s main gallery provided a detailed context for the subject of lynching and its history—featuring the “Without Sanctuary” photographs, historical artifacts, and contemporary artwork—and also provided spaces for written and videotaped visitor comments. After viewing the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to move to a second gallery and join one of the daily dialogues. (In this room, anti-lynching quotes covered the walls, and books on lynching and related subjects, as well as information on organizations, groups, and activities for “next steps,” also were

available.) The dialogues were co-led by the museum’s artist/educators (practicing artists with experience in education and community-based art practice) and community facilitators from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) Pittsburgh Branch, National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), the Urban League of Pittsburgh, and the YWCA Center for Race Relations, among others.

More than 31,000 people saw the exhibition, and approximately 1,000 engaged in the dialogue sessions. According to museum staff, wonderful relationships and conversations developed among the participants and among the artist/educators and community facilitators, which greatly enhanced the relationship between the museum and its community. “Whether they were considering issues of race in America and their role in it for the very first time, or were voicing opinions they had held and secretly thought for years and had never expressed,” says artist/educator Sarah Williams, “almost everyone who came to the school/public dialogues came away exposed to new thinking.”

The activity surrounding the exhibition also drew local media attention, which, in turn, prompted further public discourse. The exhibition thus provoked multiple and intersecting ripples of dialogue among visitors to the exhibition, between the museum and its partners, within the large community planning committee, and in the institution itself, among the staff, board, and artist-educators.

“From an internal perspective, the cross-departmental and institution-wide collaboration and joint leadership enabled the project to be fully embraced by the entire museum, which in turn enhanced our position with our communities,” says Jessica Arcand, curator of education and co-director of the “Without Sanctuary” project. “From an external perspective, the collaboration was successful because of the critical personal relationships [we developed] but also because we were able to listen, hear and value the diverse points of view we heard as much as our own.”

BEST PRACTICES FOR CIVIC DIALOGUE

When a museum mounts an exhibition as part of a civic dialogue strategy, curatorial and interpretive considerations must be balanced against the goals of the dialogue. To be successful, a dialogue should include not only public forums with opportunities for exchange, but also the intentional inclusion and active participation of people with a stake in the issue, as informants or even collaborators in the curatorial process. Though such collaboration may be perceived as infringing on curatorial autonomy and authority, for many curators, the choice to venture into civic terrain yields powerful results—from reconsideration of familiar or known works to fresh approaches to form, content, and process in the creation of exhibitions. Such innovations enhance an audience’s experience and provide a rich basis for considering contemporary issues. For curators at the Andy Warhol Museum, the intersection of the gallery and the people offered fertile ground for programmatic innovation.

Conventional elements of a museum’s educational and outreach activity can be adapted to promote dialogue about an exhibit’s subject matter and to shift from solely disseminating information to encouraging purposeful exchange around the civic issue. Fully integrating dialogue opportunities into an exhibition requires internal and external collaboration. Communication and coordination among education and curatorial staff is critical. Every one in the museum, from trustees to security guards, should have an understanding of exhibition goals and program plans.

Whether seeking to engage its publics in self-assessment through dialogue or to employ its art or humanities collections and resources as catalysts for civic dialogue, museums should be aware of several key practices that are crucial for success.

- *Active involvement of stakeholders* in planning can be critical to framing stimulating and relevant questions, attracting desired participants, sustaining interest, or fulfilling a call for action.
- *Frequent, varied, and sustained approaches* to dialogue can allow adequate focus, involve people in a variety of ways to accommodate differences, and, over the long term, contribute significantly to establishing the museum as a valuable convener of civic dialogue.
- *Effective facilitation* is essential to the successful conduct of public dialogues. Sensitive, knowledgeable facilitators can foster a sense of trust, respect, and safety; encourage participation; make perceptible

connections between the exhibit and the issue; and help participants link personal experiences to universal themes or current controversies.

- A “safe” space must be created so participants feel comfortable enough to engage in difficult exchanges. It must be neutral so that each participant will trust that his perspective will be heard and respected. Creating a safe environment is often a fundamental challenge for some institutions that have been seen as elitist, exclusionary, or simply irrelevant to the life of the community. But creating such a space in a place previously considered “off limits” or dismissed altogether could be one of the most salutary benefits of a successful dialogue.

Museums should consider how their contributions might have the most meaningful impact. What conversations are already happening? Which approaches are seen as constructive or destructive? How is the media covering the issue? Have there been previous attempts to have a dialogue? What was useful; what wasn't? What healed; what divided? What purpose would a dialogue serve and how could the institution support that purpose? Which community partners can help the museum create trust, a safe or equitable space, and authentic connection with various constituents?

Museums also should think about the goals of civic dialogue. What difference does the institution hope to make? Is a dialogue enough? Action or change may indeed be a desirable outgrowth of a dialogue, but a museum-based civic dialogue can contribute to the community in a number of ways. If the public takes notice of an issue; if people are talking, listening, and new voices and perspectives are being heard; if the stakeholders are finally at the table together in a respectful, equitable environment—these are all important indicators of success.

CIVIC THINKING FOR THE FUTURE

For a museum to expand its vision and facilitate civic engagement it must re-examine long-held perceptions from many perspectives. Dialogue methodology, as described in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* and further detailed in this toolkit, can be a dynamic tool for soliciting and talking about those perceptions and perspectives and further defining the museum's potential civic roles. Because museums are important community institutions, such dialogues have an intrinsically civic dimension and value. *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman has observed that the purview of museums now extends well beyond objects to ideas. Museums, he wrote in “Museums in a Quandary” (Aug. 26, 2001), are “storehouses of collective values and diverse histories, places where increasingly we seem to want to spend our free time and thrash out big issues.” As the Warhol and other institutions have discovered, museums can be invaluable partners in efforts to spark civic interest and animate dialogue about important issues in their own communities and beyond.

Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza direct the Animating Democracy Initiative for Americans for the Arts in Washington, D.C. Patricia E. Williams, vice president and COO at Americans for the Arts, is the former vice president, policy and programs, AAM, and was the first project director of the Museums & Community Initiative.

Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America, dedicated to creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts. The Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) is a project of Americans for the Arts Institute for Community Development and the Arts and is made possible with support from The Ford Foundation. Further information about the initiative is available at www.americansforthearts.org/AnimatingDemocracy.