

THE WARHOL: MUSEUM AS ARTIST: CREATIVE, DIALOGIC & CIVIC PRACTICE

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As I see it, a museum is an answer to a fundamental question: What does it mean to be a human being? . . . The most vital function of museums is to balance, to regulate what we might call the symbolic ecology of cultures, by putting forward alternative views and thus keeping choice and critical dialogue alive.

—Neil Postman,
“Museum as Dialogue,” *Museum News*¹

In his famous 1822 painting, *The Artist in His Museum*, Charles Wilson Peale, full of Enlightenment ideals, depicts himself as an artist-impresario. Here, front and center, surrounded by examples from his collections and his painter’s palette, he lifts a curtain to reveal, for the viewer’s delight and instruction, displays of his portraits and collections— his personal museum of the cultural and natural world. Peale directs our attention to the museum as a site of collection and education.

In 1969, Andy Warhol revolutionized established display practices with *Raid the Icebox*. Mining the collections of the Rhode Island School of Art and Design, Warhol as artist/curator chooses objects, often-ignored and seen as second-rate, to create a thoroughly unconventional set of installations. In his subversion of convention, Warhol provocatively suggests that the viewer

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consider the museum as a site of art production. He demonstrates that curating is a creative process and product and that the public space and collections of the museum can provide the context and materials for artmaking—a sort of satellite of the artist’s studio. Warhol’s provocative gesture invokes previous avant-garde strategies to underline that art is about the invitation to contemplate and engage rather than a demonstration of craft.

¹ Neil Postman, “Museum as Dialogue,” *Museum News*: September/October 1990, Vol. 69, # 5, pp. 55–58.

Both Peale and Warhol, although seemingly at opposite ends of the artistic spectrum, point to the immense creative and cultural potential of the museum. Their art offers examples of creative agency from which museums can draw inspiration to craft a new role and practice—the museum as artist.

Museum as artist draws from the rich history and contemporary vitality of museological and artistic practice to engage with contemporary civic life. This way of working involves experimenting with and challenging curatorial and educational practice as well as modes of presentation and display, using the museum’s social space and its traditional position as arbiter of taste to focus attention on civic issues. Museum as artist does not suggest that what the museum produces is a work of art; rather, that the museum should be fully engaged in “the work of art.” As noted in John Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, “. . . the first is physical and potential; the later is active and experienced. It is what the product does, its working.”² Engaging in “the work of art” is to borrow art’s ability to organize and focus energies around life experiences that have significance and value. It is a means of aligning the museum less with the constraints of institutionality and convention and more with the freedom of artistic practice. It is about imbuing the museum with creative agency. It is how we work, our practice. The results are not art products but rather a series of projects that may feature artworks and/or artists developed through a web of creative thinking, dialogue, and exchange. Some are born out of the desire to interpret anew, provoke, or entertain, while others arise from collaborative responses to sociocultural issues and contexts developed with diverse communities and individuals.

Museum as artist is also about breaking free of the conventions that have made the art museum what Theodor Adorno called “family sepulchers for works of art.”³ It is striving to ensure that while respecting artistic intentionality, works of art never simply lie in rest, but are rather embedded in a continual process of (re)interpretation and (re)presentation. Warhol, like many contemporary artists, borrows extensively from museum practices—collecting, documenting, preserving, interpreting. The museum, in turn, can embrace the interdisciplinary thinking, art practices, and narratives of “being an artist” in its approach to programming and display. However problematic it may be to complicate the arena for display or break open “the sepulcher,” contemporary times require and provide opportunities for alternative structures, for different visions of how the museum can be in the world, and for new ways of galvanizing creative potential and using social space.

Undoubtedly risky, the notion of the museum as artist is immediately susceptible to cries of relativism. Is this a means of raising the profile of other forms of creative work or redefining the



Charles Wilson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection).

² John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Perigee Books, 1934, p.162.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Valery Proust Museum,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shiery Weber, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, pp. 173–186; cited in Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, MIT Press, 1993, p. 44.

purview of art, artists, and artistic practice? Those who embrace art, through a visual culture approach or a collaborative and/or socially engaged practice may see vitality in challenging the halting of the solitary genius as the essence of being an artist. Others may see that a separation of church and state, as it were, protects and more properly honors both art and activism. It may seem ironic that The Andy Warhol Museum should present a model of the museum as artist and a collaboratively based, dialogic⁴ practice when it was created as a monument to individual artistic genius. Yet, as such, this museum may offer a flexible model of being *both /and*, of embracing tradition and new alternatives, of understanding the mutability of contexts and of not being formulaic in its approach to programming, and of drawing inspiration from artistic practice itself.

The mission of The Andy Warhol Museum is to be a vital forum in which diverse audiences of artists, scholars, and the general public are galvanized through creative interaction with the art and life of Andy Warhol. The Warhol is ever-changing, constantly redefining itself in relationship to contemporary life using its unique collections and dynamic interactive programming as tools. Like Warhol, who continually pushed artistic boundaries and practices throughout his career, the Museum has a history of considerable experimentation with diverse interpretive strategies and display techniques, exhibitions, and programs. Drawing on this experience and its mission to be a “forum,” the Museum recently presented The *Without Sanctuary* Project, one of two projects supported by the Animating Democracy Initiative. Utilizing historic photographic documentation of lynching throughout the United States as a springboard to address issues of race, bias, and bigotry, The *Without Sanctuary* Project offered the Museum the opportunity to affirm, build, and reflect on its practice and to explore new ways of working. Subsequently the Museum presented *Andy Warhol’s Electric Chairs: Reflecting on Capital Punishment in America* as a means to explore historical context and present-day views on capital punishment.

Through the lens of these projects this paper explores how museums can creatively operate in the cultural sphere as “civic engager,” both within and outside the museum’s walls. The paper draws from research, evaluation studies, and reflection to examine what an art museum striving to engage in creative, dialogic, and civic practice looks like: its modes of working, and its challenges, successes, and ongoing questions. Written from both the objectively challenging and advantageously insider position of being an individual fully immersed in the Museum’s life and work, I acknowledge the problematic in the paper’s point of view. Yet, it is also, I would argue, a complexity to embrace and to make a case for, with the strong sense that deep engagement in reflective practice from those working within institutions is ultimately, and necessarily, critical to examining practice and to exploring and realizing the possibilities and potential for change.

⁴ I use the term “dialogic” to emphasize a museum’s practice, not its programs. This process-oriented understanding of “dialogic” is stressed in Michael Bakhtin’s theory of the “dialogic” in *The Dialogic Imagination* and John Kuo Wei Tchen’s “Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment,” *Museum and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, Smithsonian Institution, 1992.

THE WITHOUT SANCTUARY PROJECT

As Andy Warhol explored popular media and visual culture in his work, the Museum sees as one of its roles the examination of the discursive power of images in our lives, whether past or present, art or document. Planned and presented with diverse community organizations and a community advisory committee, The *Without Sanctuary* Project, September 22, 2001 to January 21, 2002, was a multifaceted initiative featuring daily public dialogues, interpretive displays, multiple audience feedback opportunities, artists' projects, and a wide range of programs, at the center of which was the exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Featuring photographs and postcards that document lynching in the United States, these graphic images are laden with the emotional intensity of America's problematic past and present regarding race. Consequently, the Museum envisioned that the Project would generate community dialogue around race and related issues of bias and bigotry in the context of a local climate fraught with economic disparity and community isolation as evidenced by two high-profile, racially motivated killings, one against whites, the other against African-Americans and other minorities that occurred in the summer of 2000. The Project offered an opportunity for the Museum to contribute to the dialogue on race relations in the city and to explore the potential of its mission to be a forum for contemporary issues. In addition to the Advisory Committee, the Museum was also joined by a number of organizations in inviting the community to The *Without Sanctuary* Project—the ACLU—Greater Pittsburgh Chapter, the African American Chamber of Commerce, the Anti-Defamation League, the Pittsburgh Branch—NAACP, The National Conference for

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Community and Justice (NCCJ), the Urban League of Pittsburgh, and The YWCA of Pittsburgh Center for Race Relations.

In assessing the outcomes of the Project, *Without Sanctuary* resulted in the highest attendance for any exhibition since the Museum opened in 1994, with one of the smallest marketing budgets. The rich dialogues, depth of audience response, and

community engagement and support, attest to the reach of the Project's impact. It also generated significant funding nationally and locally. This response, viewed in the context of the fact that the Project opened ten days after the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, demonstrates a collective community willingness to deal with and address challenging and painful subjects. Overall, the Project illustrated how difficult subject matter has the potential to be a galvanizing force for collaboration and dialogue within and across communities and organizations.

The Images: “Unburying” of Place, History, and Identity

The brutal and disturbing images in *Without Sanctuary* initiate a deep “unburying,” to use the words of poet Toi Derricotte⁵—an unburying of the legacies of history, place, and identity. Comprising approximately 100 photographic prints and postcards, ranging in date from 1870 to 1960, *Without Sanctuary* documents the history of lynching from Georgia to Illinois. The lynchings are mostly of African American men, with some of other minorities, women, and children. The images depict hanging bodies and crowds of smiling white onlookers. Some feature terribly burnt corpses, a few show victims just before their death, and several of the postcards reveal pinholes as if they had been hung, trophy-like, in someone's home. In the

⁵ Phone conversation with the poet, September 2001.

publication accompanying the exhibition, James Allen, the collector of these images says of the collection:

“Until I came upon a postcard of a lynching, postcards seemed trivial to me . . . Studying these photographs has engendered in me a caution of whites, of the majority, of the young, of religion, of the accepted. Perhaps a certain circumspection concerning these things was already in me, but surely not as actively as after the first sight of a brittle postcard of Leo Frank dead in an oak tree. It wasn't the corpse that bewildered me as much as the canine-thin faces of the pack, lingering in the woods, circling after the kill . . . the photographic art played as significant a role in the ritual as torture or souvenir grabbing—creating a sort of two-dimensional biblical swine, a receptacle for a collective sinful self. Lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of the images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims are without sanctuary.”⁶

Without Sanctuary exposes untold histories, previously hidden from the mainstream of our historical ephemera. For many white audiences, the “unburying” of the viewing experience is one of encountering a shocking truth and history often unknown or unemphasized. For many black audiences, and indeed other minority groups, the “unburying” is one of living and reliving traumas of racism and bigotry. For the most part, as James Allen’s comment above attests, the “unburying” was not a trauma of violence, but rather of violence being watched by the crowds of white onlookers, the bystanders, and their implied complicity—their smiles conveying comfort in being seen and by extension their affinity with a larger society of bystanders condoning racist mob-rule punishment. Still, why do these historic images “unbury” in such a contemporary sense? Do they derive their power because they are so embedded in a culture that has not fully confronted its past or its legacy? As critic Hal Foster suggests in relation to World War II and the Holocaust, the response is perhaps a symptom of a larger cultural blockage that is a “failure to mourn which in turn prompts a compensatory imperative to remember.”⁷ Or is it that these images, presenting the stark difference of black and white experience, tap into another failure, one of community and our inability to connect? Is the emotional response a righteousness of release, the relief of oppression finally being seen? Or is it the palpable fear, as we look at this spectacle of spectatorship, prodding our conscience and complicity: what are we not seeing now? Throughout all the stages of The *Without Sanctuary* Project, these and other questions were raised and explored privately and publicly. The “unburying” took many forms.

⁶ James Allen, “Afterward,” *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, Sante Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000, p.204-205.

⁷ Hal Foster, “This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,” *Design and Crime*, London, New York: Verso, 2002, p.130.

The Presentation

The exhibition of these images at an art museum raises questions regarding the nature of photography and related media, the relationship between art and documentation, and the aestheticization of imagery of this type. How would the historicity of the lynching images influence their presentation? The art museum experience is traditionally understood as one of an unfettered looking. Would its aestheticizing aura encourage viewers to focus on the images as images and less on the realities of the awful history they revealed? Is it exploitive to present such images for aesthetic contemplation? Any image of war, terror, or torture inevitably, permanently, casts perpetrators and victims in their roles. There is no question that the exhibition of the images, however well-intentioned, (re)presents and uses their pain. Perhaps the only counter-argument is that the only horror worse than looking, is not looking. As avant-garde art practice has demonstrated throughout the last century, there is enormous power in representing images from one context in another context as a way to make us see. It is perhaps the very public nature of collective looking that takes place within an art museum that ensures we truly do look particularly at what seems incongruously in the wrong place.

The issue of the images' presentation at an art museum in general, and at The Warhol Museum in particular, was just one of the many challenges of the enormously complex histories these images unburied. Accordingly, the Museum worked closely with a community advisory group and various subcommittees and individuals on the context for presentation. An entire floor of the Museum was devoted to The *Without Sanctuary* Project. The goal was to display the photographs in an appropriate manner and to provide informative and engaging contexts and spaces that encouraged discussion, contemplation, and reflection. The main gallery featured the photographs, simply framed and chronologically hung on neutral-toned walls. A label identifying the pictured lynching accompanied each image. Opposite this gallery, a 40-ft.-long illustrated timeline, *African American Experience, Struggle, and Achievement: 1895–1995*, provided a detailed context for the subject of lynching and its history. Developed by historian Liann Tsoukas-Beasley in conjunction with the Museum, the idea for the timeline arose out of discussion with advisory committee members who stressed the importance of seeing the

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exhibition framed both in historical and contemporary contexts and in terms of African American struggle and achievement. A revised version was later published in a limited edition together with the Pittsburgh Public School District for classroom use.

A second gallery featured three displays presenting varying contexts for the exhibition. The role of the artist as activist was explored through the life and work of singer Billie Holiday and her signature song "Strange Fruit," a powerful indictment of lynching. The *Pittsburgh Courier* and the Anti-Lynching Movement provided important local and historical context through an examination of this



Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America
September 22, 2001 - January 21, 2002
The Andy Warhol Museum, Gallery 601, 6th Floor
photo by Richard Stoner

seminal African American newspaper's history and role in the anti-lynching movement. The Museum worked with Edna B. McKenzie PhD, herself a former veteran reporter for the *Courier*, along with others on the display. A contemporary context was provided by artist Lonnie Graham's collage, *A Contemporary View: Media 1996–2001*. The second gallery also featured tables, chairs, comment books, a video comment booth, and monitors that replayed the comments. A small adjacent gallery provided a more private, quiet space. The following are some samples of visitor comments:

"I feel sorry for black people because life is very short. And I feel sad because I'm a black person too. And if I were one of them it probalely happen to me to. Age 8." [on opposite page, with arrow pointing to child's comment] "This is what really hurts. I felt this way at 8 too. And now I'm 35. Will things ever change?"

"January 12, 2002. It took me this long to work up to coming to this exhibit. I still could not look at all the picture. Sometimes hell is right here in the good ol' US of A. God save us all."

"When I first read about this exhibit I thought about how no one ever mentioned this in history class, just like the Japanese concentration camps. The ugly, shameful parts of our history are glossed over. As I thought about it, I can recall my elegant little grandmother beginning a story—'And they was going to lynch a niggar'—I'm shamed."

The final gallery was devoted to discussion and resources where the Museum offered a wide range of books and other reading materials on lynching and related subjects, as well as information on organizations and activities for "next steps." The walls featured select quotations, including comments from anti-lynching activist Ida B Wells, Martin Luther King, Jr., artist Adrian Piper, poet Czeslaw Milosz, Elie Wiesel, Margaret Mead, and a Museum visitor who draws a parallel between *Without Sanctuary* and the "lynching" of Matthew Sheppard for being gay. The space provided a large discussion area for the daily *Without Sanctuary* dialogues. Visiting groups were also welcome to use this area. Visitors were also invited to write *A Postcard for Tolerance*, a self-addressed, personal resolution that each individual could pin up to the wall as part of a collective display. At the end of the Project, the Museum sent all of the post-cards to their respective authors. The goal was to encourage reflection and action on the most personal and individual level and to reinforce the learning experience by reminding visitors of their resolutions weeks or months after their Museum visit. It also was a small way to offer a positive message to counteract that some of the *Without Sanctuary* images had been sent as postcards through the U.S. mail. A small sample of the postcards follows:

San Diego, CA: "Freaks are everywhere! They don't come in any one color. Rely on your instincts and remember this show. Love, Me."

Eugene, OR: "Yo Anth: 1. Read more African American authors 2. volunteer at the Latino center already. Anth."

Pittsburgh, PA: "I am white therefore I'm a racist. From this truth I can move forward in reforming myself. I must be conscious of my privilege, not just today but tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after that."

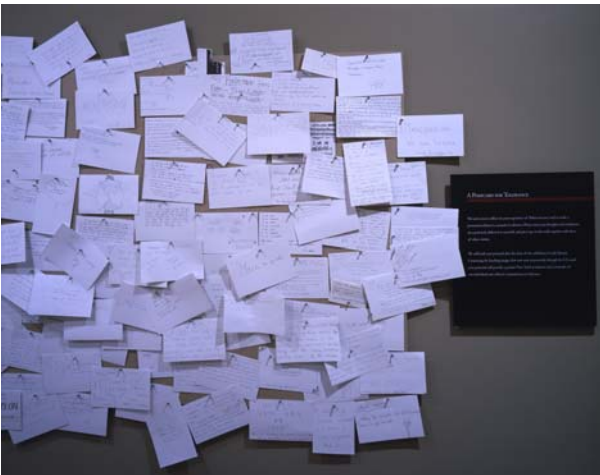
Public dialogues

“People really tried to talk. That was miraculous.”

—Artist/Educator, Warhol Museum

Dialogues were held daily (Tuesday–Sunday) at 1 p.m. and on Fridays at 1 and 7 p.m. The importance of providing dialogue opportunities was stressed over and over again by our advisory committee. The format offered visitors a structure to share their reactions to the images with other visitors. The dialogues were co-led by The Warhol’s artist/educators (practicing artists with experience in education and community-based art practice) and community facilitators from the NAACP’s Pittsburgh Branch, National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), The Urban League of Pittsburgh, YWCA Center for Race Relations, as well as other organizations and experienced individuals. The community facilitators were recruited and coordinated by the

YWCA Center for Race Relations. A number of planning meetings took place to determine the best way to approach the dialogues with representatives from the organizations listed above. In these meetings, the idea of cofacilitation, the goals and structure of the dialogues, and roles and responsibilities were discussed and determined. The structure of the dialogues was decided to be one of co-facilitation between Artist/Educator staff at the Museum and trained volunteers identified by the community groups. The dialogues followed simple steps: the Artists/Educator and the community volunteer introduced the Project, the role of dialogue, and dialogue ground rules (adapted from YWCA Study Circles and other models). Then, facilitators encouraged participants to reflect individually by noting their thoughts on blank cards, then to share with a partner, and finally engage in group discussion. The final piece of the dialogue stressed next steps and asked participants to complete a postcard for tolerance and pointed out available community



A Postcard for Tolerance.

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photo by Richard Stoner

resources.

Approximately 1,000 people engaged in the daily dialogues. Although at times numbers were small for the dialogues, the conversations were always rich and engaging. Another aspect of the dialogue was the wonderful relationships that evolved between the artist/educators and community facilitators, which greatly enhanced the engagement of the community with the Museum and vice versa. It is interesting to note however that the percentage of participation in the dialogues when compared with overall attendance is quite low (less than 5%). Given how often offering dialogues was stressed by advisory committee members this may suggest that the idea of having dialogues available may have been more important than actual participation in the dialogues themselves. This also made the more informal dialogue opportunities offered in the Project such as video comment booths, comment books etc, and postcards extremely important.

School programs

“The way we teach history—it’s just national myths. We really just tell stories.”

—Student Interview

Another point stressed by the Advisory Committee was the importance of working with the youth audience. School programs featured a two-hour program that included an orientation, viewing of the exhibition, and a dialogue session recommended for grades 7–12. To assist teachers in preparing for their visits, a teacher resource pack entitled *Art, Activism and Dialogue* was developed. We also held a Teacher Open House, which involved lectures, a viewing of the exhibition, and dialogue sessions. We worked in-depth with a number of schools. These included Pittsburgh High School for Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA), one of our partner schools, where students produced a performance and publication, “From Roots to Branches”—a series of student monologues inspired by the images featuring collaboration between visual arts, literary arts, and drama students. We also worked with other schools suggested by Pittsburgh Public School administrators, as well as several other local and regional public, private, and parochial schools that responded to a Request for Proposals invitation to participate. Our dialogues and discussions with teachers, parents, and students were rich, surprising, provocative, and revealing. During a dialogue with teachers and parents held in preparation for students’ visit to the Museum, one teacher argued against bringing the students on the grounds that she could teach the unit on tolerance without such images, only to be counteracted by a passionate plea from a parent not to hide the truth from their children. Another dialogue became highly charged when a student from a mostly all-white suburb recognized a relative amongst the white bystanders in one of the images. Overwhelmingly, students expressed frustration at “not being told the truth about history” and a desire to see the subject taught in schools.

Other

Special events included a wide range of visiting groups such as church groups, diversity coalitions, businesses, groups of college students, and community organizations. Events varied from special viewings of the exhibition and dialogue sessions run by artist/educators, to groups using our dialogue space for meetings and organizing their own dialogue sessions. Throughout the course of the exhibition, several forums were planned. In addition to musical performances and a talk by the collector of the *Without Sanctuary* images, James Allen, the opening day featured forums of scholars and religious leaders. These were the most well-attended and engaged of the forums. Others included an artist forum and one with local respondents. In addition, one of the most successful programs was a poetry reading by two leading African American poets, Toi Derricotte and Michael Harper.

Creative Practice

A person’s consciousness is the way in which he or she thrusts into the world. It is not some interiority, some realm of awareness inside the brain. Rather, it must be understood as a reaching out, an intending, a grasping of the appearances of things. Acts of various kinds are involved: perceptual, cognitive, intuitive, emotional and yes—again imaginative . . . When . . . a person chooses to view herself or himself in the midst of things, as beginner or learner or explorer, and has the imagination to envisage new

things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible. As Emily Dickinson puts it, “The Possible’s slow fuse is lit/By the Imagination.”

—Maxine Greene,
*Releasing the Imagination: Essays on
Education, the Arts and Social Change*⁸

1) Museum as artist in community

The museum as artist views itself more as an individual, or as Maxine Greene describes, a “beginner or learner or explorer.” The museum also adopts a more community-based practice. Particularly appropriate for a single-artist museum, it behaves and functions on a macro level like an artist in community. In adopting a role of artist/creative facilitator/institution, assumed notions of neutrality are qualified with a creative agency. An artist’s practice, whose work is strongly rooted in community, can be one that, to use dialogue consultant Patricia Romney’s term borrowed from family therapy, is “multipartial,”⁹ rather than neutral. However, in addition and in contrast to the analogy of a therapist respecting all sides, the artist distinctly foregrounds his/her practice as one through which others can express themselves. On a macro level, aligning itself with an artistic role in its activities and presentations enables the museum to function not only as convener, facilitator, or community organizer, but also to explicitly and simultaneously foreground the museum’s creative role as interpreter, provocateur, and catalyst.

2) Mutability of contexts

Reflecting the more process- and performance-oriented practice of some artists, the museum as artist is both a context and a content provider.¹⁰ The work becomes about orchestrating conversations and creating and responding to contexts. The contexts of politics, community leadership, historical and cultural moments, and personal histories and agendas are a creative resource. Investigating how to structure, utilize, and tap into these contexts to create opportunities for their interaction begins by acknowledging their shifting terrain and recognizing what you do or do not know. For *Without Sanctuary* three key contexts clearly affected the development, presentation, and reception of the Project:

Leadership and management of the organization are white...The Museum would need to prove itself before it could be trusted.

The Racial Context: The Museum had already telegraphed itself to the Pittsburgh community as a forum and a risk-taker. This was evident in its programming and its vocal and provocative director, never shy to take a public stance on critical community issues. Nevertheless, leadership and management of the organization are white. The reality of the racial makeup of the organization demanded that The *Without Sanctuary* Project’s evolution and presentation would necessarily involve significant input from the African American community. The Museum would need to prove itself before it could be trusted. Certainly, winning an organizational racial justice award a month prior to the opening of the Project was an important honor for the Museum’s work and signal to the larger community. Some in the African American community knew the Museum’s reputation for quality, and were positively disposed toward collaborating on the Project: “I knew they would do it right.” Others who perceived the Warhol as a predominantly white institution, dedicated to a white gay man, were concerned that because Andy Warhol was gay, the Museum

⁸ Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995.

⁹ Pat Romney comment at Animating Democracy Initiative’s Learning Exchange, Chicago, November 2001.

¹⁰ Grant Kester citing the work of British artist Peter Dunn, *ibid*.

would steer the project to issues of homophobia. As noted earlier, the local Pittsburgh context is fraught with racial disparity, the Project occurred the year after the community was reeling from two racially motivated killing sprees, and many people were keen to explore ways to deal with the problems. Additionally, some African American leaders voiced concern regarding younger African Americans' lack of knowledge of past racial struggles and disinterest in rallying and fighting for social justice. The *Without Sanctuary* Project was, they felt, an opportunity to teach history and to encourage youth action. All of these motivations, agendas, and concerns influenced the Project.

The Museum Context: Over the course of its brief history, the Museum had experimented with different forms of programming, interpretive display, and community engagement. Building on a strategic plan conducted in 1999-2000, a new mission statement was written to reflect the Museum's evolving practice. The timing of *Without Sanctuary* gave the Warhol an opportunity to flex the muscle of this new mission statement and to explore an expanded notion of the Museum's potential as a vital "forum" using Warhol's art, life, and practice as a springboard. Significantly, leadership through the Museum's director fully embraced and supported risk; staff had a desire to learn and take risks and had many of the skills needed to engage and work with community; and of course staff had the expertise required to curate and mount the exhibition and market it.

A National Crisis: The *Without Sanctuary* Project opened ten days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. We were all unsure how this would affect engagement with the project. A teacher workshop on September 12 was a live-wire of debate. Interestingly, the very vulnerability and emotion people felt post-9/11 seemed to enhance interest in the history, issues, and themes of the Project rather than detract from it. The opening day on September 21 was filled with palpable raw emotion. There was a rousing gospel choir and a series of community speakers, a scholars' panel at which an African American participant observed that, for the first time "white America feels vulnerable; we've always felt that way," and challenges to the diverse panel of speakers by NCOBRA (National Coalition for Blacks for Reparation). An abandoned car outside the Museum made us all a little on edge. Interestingly, in "Hidden History: An Exploratory Case Study Looking at the Impact of The Andy Warhol Museum's *Without Sanctuary* Project," researcher Lynne Conner argues that "while the events of September 11 certainly increased the urgency of the Project's mission, it is likely that the Museum would have accomplished the goal of creating a forum for reasonable (safe) discussion despite it. This is supported by the level of testimony regarding the deep confusion about race and racial politics here in Pittsburgh."¹¹ Obviously, it is impossible to know what the difference in audience reception might have been without 9/11 but the sheer volume of visitor comments, written and video, and postcards reflecting on the context of 9/11 as well as the numerous mentions in media coverage throughout the exhibition suggest the deep resonance people felt as they drew contemporary parallels with their experience. The Project seems to have provided an important and needed place of reflection at such a difficult time.

¹¹ Lynne Conner, Ph.D., "Hidden History: An Exploratory Case Study Looking at the Impact of the Andy Warhol Museum's *Without Sanctuary* Project," November 2002, p. 14.

3) A new curatorial synthesis

What is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?

—Edward Said¹²

A museum engaged in creative, dialogic, and civic practice opens itself up to multiple voices and to creating/curating together with audiences. In the process, the museum plays a critical role in galvanizing energies and promoting a sharing of knowledge that, in turn, builds trust and relationships within and across communities. Critical to this practice is that an exhibition's or project's development or synthesis—the thoughtful weaving together of research, ideas, conversations, knowledge, and experience—happens together with audiences. This is distinctly different from traditional curatorial practice, where ideas are fully synthesized by an individual curator prior to any public presentation and indeed, sometimes, even prior to internal communication. It is through “working together” that barriers are broken down and relationships built, as one of our community advisory group members, Malik Bankston, noted.¹³ Action is key to relationship-building, particularly important to minority communities that are often highly suspicious of institutional intentions. In the development of The *Without Sanctuary* Project, the contexts for presentation and issues to be considered were discussed and determined in multiple conversations, from informal chats to advisory committee meetings. The synthesis of the Project was mutually constructed. The Museum brought its curatorial expertise;

the committee members and diverse individual collaborators brought their practices and knowledge of community, history, and local contexts.

Opening the curatorial process up to different forms of synthesis challenges both internal and external perceptions of what art museums do and how they work: curating becomes a function and not necessarily an individual role; a museum's expertise manifests itself as a weaving together of different strands of knowledge, as opposed to being the holder of knowledge; and art's creative processes and historical and cultural contexts are highlighted. The art museum experience becomes less about looking at art, and more about making sense of the world. All of this, of course, questions the art museum as elite institution and as showcase for connoisseurship and artistic genius.

In his essay “Conversation Pieces: Collaboration and Artistic Identity,” Grant Kester reflects that an aesthetic of collaboration needs to “evoke instead a form of art

practice defined by openness, listening and intersubjective vulnerability.”¹⁴ This is hard, and doubly so when dealing with such emotional and volatile subjects as race. The *Without Sanctuary* Project, particularly in its development stages, was marked by what I can only describe as a constant state of rawness and self- and institutional-questioning. Museum staff struggled with listening and voicing; figuring out how to articulate our point of view and not lose sight of our



Students viewing postcards.
Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America
September 22, 2001 - January 21, 2002
The Andy Warhol Museum, Gallery 608, 6th Floor
photo by Richard Stoner

¹² Edward Said as cited in Hal Foster, *Design and Crime (And Other Diatribes)*, London/New York: Verso, 2002.

¹³ Conversation with Community Advisory Committee member Malik Bankston during the *Without Sanctuary* Project.

¹⁴ Grant Kester, “Conversation Pieces: Collaboration and Artistic Identity,” *Unlimited Partnerships: Collaborations in Contemporary Art*.

identity, while being open, responsive, and willing to change those very same points of view. Each conversation, faux pas, consultation, pointed comment, or attack, over time, built solid foundations for our work enabling us to speak to the broader community from a position of strength. Although this kind of synthesis is messy, destabilizing, complex, slow, and often frustrating, it is immensely rich, dynamic, and in many ways has more impact in its collective reach and engagement. Contrary to some critics' cry that such practices result in "a legacy of compromise that leads to banality" or "vapid populism,"¹⁵ this way of working does not call upon the museum to eschew its expertise or to simply do what the community wants. Rather, it demands a fuller expression of that expertise interwoven with the contexts of people's lives. The processes of trust, relationship-building, and programmatic experimentation involved in such work sets the stage for future projects where even richer and deeper explorations may be possible. Embracing a new kind of curatorial synthesis or art practice is not about replacing one model for another—such as the narrative of sole artistic genius for one of collaboration. It is about seeing the potential of new narratives of making or curating and finding interesting ways for them to coexist.

Dialogic Practice

1) *Museum as public space for private reflection made public*

To be honest about race demands that one be honest about one's racial attitudes. The fear of revealing these dirty secrets has hindered race talk for decades. The irony is that it is only by revealing such secrets that race talk can be effective. It might make better sense for those officials, teachers, and institutions committed to improving race relations in America to encourage self-inquiry on the most personal, rather than the most public, level.

—Maurice Berger, *White Lies*¹⁶

Lucy: Today you were angry because of how unprepared you felt. Angry because you have had 18 years of school and never once were you shown the truth about this country. You were angry because authors and teachers picked and chose what they wanted to include in their histories. You vowed not to let your children feel that way.

—Museum Visitor,
Postcards for Tolerance Project¹⁷

For a museum to be an effective forum for dialogue, it is key to create a safe place to look, to see and be seen, to articulate and to be listened to, to reflect, and to air opinions. Researcher Lynne Conner's case study on The *Without Sanctuary* Project describes this use of the Museum's space. She notes that several archetypal forms of personal response predominated—the soapbox, the confessional, the pulpit, and the performance space.¹⁸ Throughout the project, the Museum not only acted as a public space for private reflection but importantly as a space where visitors could make those private reflections public. For example, visitors could participate in one of the facilitated daily discussion groups, write in a comment book, record their video comment, or complete a *Postcard for Tolerance*. Significantly, these various activities allowed

¹⁵ Michael Kimmelman, article on 9/11 memorial, *New York Times*, December 8, 2003.

¹⁶ Maurice Berger, *White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 180.

¹⁷ Written on the day of the opening of the *Without Sanctuary* Project, this was the first postcard pinned on the wall for the *Postcards for Tolerance* project.

¹⁸ Lynne Conner *ibid.* p. 7.

visitors to make their reflections public to varying degrees, and all comments could be made in the context of and in relation to other points of view. As Conner notes:

Perhaps the single most significant way of measuring the impact of *Without Sanctuary* is through the sheer variety of methods and means by which “dialogues” were launched during its run. The term “dialogue” is used here in its literal context, meaning an exchange of ideas and opinions on particular issues. Dialogues are often attempts to reach an agreement or settlement, but they can be a more basic vehicle (“dia” means “through” or “between” in ancient Greek) used to house a debate. A dialogue can be either public or private and can facilitate a diverse range of intentions.¹⁹

Judging by the thousands of written comments—many of which directly responded to other comments—the hundreds of postcards, and the many hours of video comments, visitors truly availed themselves of these opportunities. Indeed, many more people engaged in these more “private” forms of dialogue than in the more “public” daily dialogues. Importantly, those visitors who may not have been comfortable or drawn to comment themselves could engage with others by reading or listening to different points of view, testing their perspective and responses with those of others. This kind of internal dialogue and responsive understanding is possible through the museum taking an active role in encouraging an articulation of the viewing experience, and foregrounding the diverse nature of that experience. Given the low percentage of visitors who participated in organized forms of dialogue, these private and informal opportunities may be the most important kind of “dialogue” to offer.

2) *Image as a table for conversation: specificity & universality*

By placing individuals at the center as both actors in and observers of history, we can build a historical culture around participation. Individuals, after all, experience, interpret, revisit, reinterpret—in short, they remember and forget. Nations, cultures, and institutions can’t, even though politicians and pundits pretend they can. Individuals can discover, recognize, ignore, cross-examine, fear, dream, hope . . . by comparing their experiences and interpretations with those of others, individuals create empathy that permits them to enter into the experiences of people from other times, places, people from other backgrounds . . . people develop their empathy toward strangers not as political choices or philosophical abstractions but from intimate contacts with people around them.²⁰

—David Thelen,
The Presence of the Past, 1998

In a paper presented at a panel on The *Without Sanctuary* Project held by Carnegie Mellon University’s Center for Arts and Society, Melissa Ragona, a fellow at the center, suggested that the very specificity of photos, depicting a very specific lynch mob, “nullifies our complicity . . .” She argues that it is the more universal image, such as Warhol’s images of electric chairs or knives for example, that “inculcate everyone: you, the viewer; as well as the State; the artist; the accused; and the media.”²¹ The huge response to the lynching images would seem to contradict

¹⁹ Ibid p.7–8.

²⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 1999.

²¹ Melissa Ragona, “Unmatched Parallels: The Warhol’s *Without Sanctuary* Up-Against and Across-the-Hall from Andy,” paper delivered at a panel on The *Without Sanctuary* Project, Carnegie Mellon University, Center for Arts and Society, October 2001.

the argument that specificity nullifies. Rather, it would seem to be the opposite, as multiple visitors commented upon the smiling faces of the “specific” lynch mobs and drew analogies to contemporary contexts and personal experience. Clearly, the images functioned as lightning rods for individual responses. Perhaps because of this, however, it was often difficult to get beyond the specific response of one person or of one community to address universal themes inherent in the images.

African Americans described being weary of universal themes and attempts to extend their experience to other biases and bigotries.

One of the obstacles in moving from the specific to the universal was grounded in the fact that the lynching photographs had been hidden from the collective memory. Once defined as an “image bequeathed to posterity,”²² collective memory implies collective sharing. The photographs are evidence of hidden memories and images, unshared for the most part and unacknowledged in the national consciousness. This shift from obscurity to newfound visibility requires an emotional processing—a collective witnessing and sharing that draws its power from specific experience rather than universal themes. The experience of *The Without Sanctuary Project* enabled an understanding of the importance of providing a public and collective space to initiate this process—one that cannot be prescribed or rushed. At times this proved challenging for the Museum and the artistic and academic culture within which it is embedded, a culture inclined to move from the emotional to the more intellectual plane and one where a purely emotional response is often viewed as a lower gear to shift from. Conversely, many of those from African-American communities with whom we worked were suspicious of a nonemotional response, which they regarded as an intellectualization of the images to avoid dealing with racism. African Americans described being weary of universal themes and attempts to extend their experience to other biases and bigotries. Such extensions were seen as yet another way to bury a history that has not been told, as a refusal to acknowledge racism and an unwillingness to acknowledge their pain and its emotional residue on an individual and collective level.

Patricia Williams, in her book, *Seeing a Color Blind Future*, outlines how this kind of universalizing of racial struggles can often be more about avoidance of—rather than dealing with—racial problems. She demonstrates this through an example of the well-intentioned white liberal teachers at her son’s nursery school who urged a happy color- doesn’t-matter message, prompted by a racial incident that had precisely shown that it did.²³ Why in matters of race, as writer bell hooks suggests in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation*, do “people just lose their rational capacity to know how to approach something?”²⁴ At times, being white and a woman co-directing this Project was very difficult. Particularly in the early stages, I can certainly attest to moments in meetings of feeling like my knowledge had been hit with a Mack truck. Community members in turn also struggled with the emotional unburying the images instigated.

The “push and pull” between specificity and universality, emotion and intellect, and one community’s oppression and the oppressions of many, while an undercurrent at some of the Advisory Committee meetings, manifested itself primarily in the discussions over the goals and format of the Public Dialogues. From the community standpoint, this was prompted by a fear that the Museum would steer the conversations to address issues of homophobia; they needed clear assurances that the predominant topic of lynching of African Americans would not be

²² As cited by Conover Hunt in Conover Hunt, *JFK For a New Generation*, Dallas: The Sixth Floor Museum & Southern Methodist University Press, 1996, p. 17.

²³ Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race (Reith Lectures)*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1997.

²⁴ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, 1994, as cited in Maurice Berger, *ibid.*, p. 173.

wavered from. This was expressed both directly and indirectly with such comments as “Let’s not have folks derail the conversation.” While fully respecting the enormity of the subject and community perspectives, the Museum was nevertheless concerned that the community organizations would overly essentialize the discussions.

We saw the images as tables for conversation, not as anti-racism workshops. The story of lynching of African Americans was obviously paramount, but it was important that people could bring to the dialogues what they saw in and felt about the images; not acknowledging or allowing the expression of other sensitivities and oppressions had the potential to alienate and in turn render people less willing to hear the story of racism past and present. Dialogue Committee members could support this approach because, as one of the African American leaders reflected, she embraced the presentation of *Without Sanctuary* at a “white institution” and indeed may not have done so at a “black institution,” because she felt the only way to end racism was through building “white allies,” and the exhibition at the Warhol provided just such an opportunity. In turn, the Museum understood the importance of “black allies” in the planning, development, and presentation of The *Without Sanctuary* Project. Critically, as we negotiated obstacles, Museum staff and Advisory Committee members were vested in making it work. This mutuality was fundamental to the Project’s success.

Later on, while still being very complimentary of the Museum, one of the African American community leaders expressed regret that they did not have the resources to have presented the exhibition themselves. Without a doubt the Museum had the power of resources to bring to the table. Were we sensitive enough to this as we tried to be responsive to community concerns? What would have happened had the exhibition been presented at an African American organization? Did the Museum’s desire and need to engage “black allies” make us overlook opportunities to advance the concerns of other established allies, namely the gay community? How much of an issue this was is unclear, internal and external perspectives on this differ, but it is likely that aspects of the Project may have been different with other players at the table.

Yes, opportunities were missed; but the challenge of the main subject at hand was overwhelming. I felt and still feel that we pushed as far as we could at that moment or as far as was appropriate given the content. In our approach to the public dialogues as “images as tables for conversation,” in our use of quotations in the galleries, in our invitation to diverse

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community organizations to jointly co-present the Project, and in ensuring inclusive representation at our various public forum programs, I believe that we strove to stress diverse humanitarian themes. It may not always be appropriate to strive for balance. Indeed, balance may sometimes be its

own bias. The challenge is to create spaces and opportunities for people to respect one another’s struggles and specificity in all phases of a project’s planning, development, and presentation. The *Without Sanctuary* Project revealed the importance of honoring and acknowledging the specificity of a community’s history and experience, while striving to ensure an openness that respects and does not alienate diverse individual and other communities’ “unburying.” For the museum as artist and forum, the image, artwork, or document is the table for conversation, a gathering place to share and engage dialogue across perspectives and through specificity. When we gather to talk around an image, we all start from the same place.

3) *Image, context and response considered equally*

Whether or not viewers chose to write in a comment book or participate in a dialogue, it was clear through the museum's presentation of accompanying displays and diverse outlets for comments that *image, context, and response* were important and *considered equally*. Interestingly, some criticism from academic circles focused on either the presentation being too "aesthetic" or too "art museum as history museum."²⁵ Melissa Ragona's comments thoughtfully encapsulate some of the concerns with the latter:

The Warhol's *Without Sanctuary* show, besides serving as a powerful, graphic indictment of racist America, forces us to rethink the work of Warhol and the voyeuristic pleasure and aversion which his most controversial and often most celebrated works produce. Upon first entering the exhibit, however, it seems we are suddenly cut off from The Warhol museum and Warhol's work and enter yet another institution, namely the History Museum with its pedagogical accoutrements: historical time-line, rich local contexts, and interactive stations for listening, feedback, and other forms of viewer reflexivity. In a sense, we are taken out of the realm of "controversial art," or the trickster position of Warhol—his provocations of violence: the grisly car accidents, the cool electric chairs, the Tuna Fish Disasters, the suicides, and the race riots. Especially, the latter (the race riots)—when viewed up against and in the context of *Without Sanctuary*—take on a forceful historical significance which, with time, has diminished. On the one hand, this is a good thing: it re-invests Warhol's project with a political urgency which has been lost through his iconic presence, his self-portrait, in a sense, as a Campbell Soup Can. But the danger here is a reinscription of an extremely complex Art Project (the power of POP was its seeming simplicity and complicity with the commercial world it attempted to document and transpose) with a historical realism—which seems to be saying, "Look at what really happened." And we do. And in this process, art pales in relation to documentation and explanation.²⁶

Ragona's comments point to the fact that we have accepted a sort of nonaction policy on the art museum environment for fear of overly inscribing the art object, and indeed, particularly when considering contemporary art, the nonart object as art. However, rather than leaving art "open" to multiple interpretation, this privileges the point of view that art speaks without any. I would suggest that it is here where we truly risk art "paling in relation to documentation and explanation." If we are willing to experiment and become more provisional in our approach to interpretation and display, where we mix different strategies—from a very contextual and interactive interpretation to the traditional white-cube presentation—as well as foreground multiple points of view, we signal openness to our audiences and free ourselves from the concern that a particular reading may reduce, overly inscribe, or limit an artwork's potential scope.

²⁵ Comments at panel discussion on The *Without Sanctuary* Project held by Carnegie Mellon's Center for Arts and Society, October 2001.

²⁶ Melissa Ragona, *ibid*.

In the case of *Without Sanctuary*, as noted by researcher Lynne Conner, the tools and strategies of experiencing art (both art-making and art-consuming) were employed, from encouraging writing and drawing within gallery space to the exhibition design itself, without necessarily engaging the established rhetoric of the art world.²⁷ This play of combining the aesthetic and the contextual is well illustrated by one of the most successful displays of the project, the large-scale, wall-mural-style timeline, “African American Experience 1895–1995: Struggle and Achievement,” which borrowed from the ritual attention of art and the pedagogic dimension of documentation and explanation. Placed to directly face the exhibition of the lynching images, the timeline functioned as an informative tool, an anchor for dialogue bracing the pre- and post-viewing experience, and a site of ritual exploration—the walking, pausing, touching, and aura of quiet reverence reminiscent of Maya Lin’s *Vietnam War Memorial* in Washington, DC. In essence, it is this liminality, or in-between state, of the art museum as temple and repository of culture and the art museum as forum that produces a powerful place of expression. This, in turn, provides possibilities to reflect on, affect, and create culture.



“African American Experience 1895–1995: Struggle and Achievement.”
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4) *A catalyst for discussion beyond the museum’s walls*

Another important aspect of dialogic practice is that the museum is not only a forum on site, but also out there in the world through projects that catalyze discussion. Museum staff and community collaborators constantly referred to the many conversations they participated in or overheard with family, friends, and colleagues about *The Without Sanctuary Project*. A popular radio show host featured a discussion of the exhibition on her program, letters to the editor praised and criticized the Museum for presenting it, and numerous critical reviews discussed various aspects. All of this shaped visitors’ experience prior to coming to the Museum, engaging a larger community, however tangentially, with the issues. This also raised the awareness level of the Warhol Museum itself. Another vital dimension of dialogic practice was the various outreach and relationship-building initiatives with diverse individuals and groups in the planning and development process. Meetings often lasted hours and were opportunities to open up discussion around personal experiences of racism, to enable trust building, and to correct misperceptions, as well as to talk about and plan for the project itself. These were fundamental to building the foundations for the project’s success and also prompted the word-of-mouth exchange that was a significant part of the civic dialogue.

²⁷ Lynne Conner, *ibid*, p 32.

5) “Project” as a way to signal a different and more dialogic practice

At times during the Project, Museum staff wondered what would have happened if we had just shown the images without the accompanying “Project” and all its interpretive displays, community dialogues, and initiatives. While it is impossible to predict what the reaction would have been, judging by the multiple and necessary trust-building conversations in the planning process, it is likely that it would have been interpreted as a deliberately sensational gesture, in line with a general public perception of Warhol and the Museum. It might also have been seen, as the Museum’s director Thomas Sokolowski noted, as an intentionally “take-it-or-leave-it, patriarchal”²⁸ gesture.

Instead, through The *Without Sanctuary* Project, the Museum was able to inscribe its mission, and by extension Andy Warhol’s work—including its playful elements and avant-garde status—with newfound perceptions of seriousness and responsibility. This also opens up new possibilities for the Museum’s programming. As Janet Sarbaugh, director of the Heinz Endowments Arts and Culture Program, remarked, “*Without Sanctuary* shows they can take on controversial subjects with sensitivity and without pulling punches. This gives them permission to attempt even more as they continue to explore popular culture.”²⁹

Another critically important aspect that influenced the context of display and public perception was the presentation of *Without Sanctuary* as a “Project.” Framing the initiative as a “Project” brought the public response, and the issues of preparing for it, to the forefront. This in turn led to a greater sense of internal collaboration, including joint leadership from curatorial and education departments, reflecting what researcher Karen Knutson describes in her report on the Museum and Advisory Committee process, as a much more pronounced and importantly cross-departmental “emphasis on visitor experience.”³⁰ The term “project” is of course just semantics. However, from an internal standpoint it nevertheless clearly signaled and valued something more than and in addition to an “exhibition.” This was important in suggesting a new way of working, which in turn influenced how the Museum communicated to the public, from the planning stages to the actual displays.

6) Performing openness

[The constructivist museum] publicly acknowledges its own role in constructing meaning when it displays objects and develops programs. It’s important that this human decision-making process—full of compromise, personal views, opinions, prejudices, and well-meaning efforts to provide the best possible material for the public—be opened up to view.³¹

—George Hein,
Learning in the Museum

²⁸ Tom Sokolowski as quoted in “Without Sanctuary,” an article by Jim Davidson in *h: The Magazine of The Heinz Endowments*, Winter 2002.

²⁹ Janet Sarbaugh, *ibid.*

³⁰ Karen Knutson, *Report on The Community Advisory Board Process for The Without Sanctuary Project*, p. 10 – 11.

³¹ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, Routledge, 1998, p. 177.

Art history professor Carol Duncan asserts in her book, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, that the meaning of the museum is enacted in its rituals.³² Like ritual, Duncan's assertion suggests that a museum must constantly (re)perform itself to its publics, if it is to put forth an expanded notion of itself and its place in the community. David Carr, professor of information and library science, borrowing from an Umberto Eco essay on improvisational music, "The Poetics of the Open Work," stresses this notion of the museum as a performative space when he suggests that the museum should be an "open work created only in the play of its users."³³ As such, the "open work" underlines the importance of the audience's place within the "work." It also emphasizes a creative and active learning process, since the "work" has to be performed to derive meaning. The museum provides the physical and sociocultural context for interaction, while also itself a creative user, shaping and learning from "the work."

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How an art museum performs or signals this openness is a subject of much debate. Despite a century filled with artists engaged in institutional critique and significant discussions of curatorial practice, the actual paradigms of display from large-scale international art exhibitions to our seeming *de facto* white wall dioramas, have changed little. Curatorial and architectural language describing exhibitions and new buildings often purports a new ideology of "openness" or "transparency" or the "dictatorship of the viewer" without formats or practices changing in any radical way. It is not enough for a museum to posit itself as "open" with its publics; it must perform it and in ways that those publics recognize.

First and foremost, as The *Without Sanctuary* Project demonstrates, it is critical that this openness is made manifest in the display environment. If we truly want to "open" ourselves up to interpretation, we need to put as much thought into the process of creating an environment conducive to open exchange as we do into how things look; a comment book simply left on a pedestal at the end of an exhibition will duly be treated as such, an afterthought. Secondly, we do not give up our voice, expertise, or role as interpreters. Indeed, opening up demands skill in combining an articulation of our knowledge with listening to many voices, and in explaining ourselves with clarity *and* complexity. Thirdly, when we explicitly acknowledge and open up the museum's mediating role, we need to value, that we are learning not only *from* but also *with* our audiences and expect to change in the process. It is in this openness that we become dialogic.

Civic Practice

"Emotional distance from either objects or audiences diminishes the value and undermines the impact of our work. If we don't care, what's the point?"

—R. Archibald,
"Narratives for a New Century,"
Museum News, 1998³⁴

³² Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, Routledge, 1995, p. 2.

³³ Discussed during a presentation at American Association of Museum's *Learning in Museums Seminar*, Chicago, 1995.

³⁴ Archibald, R. (1998). "Narratives for a new century." Adapted from a speech given at "Building a sense of place: A forum for museums partnering with community" conference. *Museum News* pp. 33–43. Cited in Karen Knutson, *ibid*, p.15.

³Robert Hughes, *Shock of the New*, New York: Knopf 1981, p. 391.

1) Responsibility & using the privilege of the museum's position

Art critic Robert Hughes reflected, in *Shock of the New*: “over the last half-century, the museum has supplanted the Church as the main focus of civic pride in American cities.”³⁵ The idea of civic practice, however, uses the privilege of the museum as civic building to engage with the life of the city as a civic participant. Perhaps the most critical, and, at times, the most overlooked element in the midst of organizations looking for models and formulas of civic engagement, is the importance of intent, of really wanting to. For The *Without Sanctuary* Project, the Museum’s “wanting to” enabled a willingness to make things work and to figure out ways over, around, and through obstacles. It also signaled a commitment to responsive action and to listening that was visibly perceived and valued by those with whom we worked. Creating together, collaborating, and opening up in this way, although very dynamic and rewarding, can at times be extremely frustrating, slow, and fraught with the potential for misunderstanding. It is doubly hard to get into this fray without really *wanting to*. Much of the language around community engagement stresses the importance of accountability and need. Even though this is immensely important, it nevertheless emphasizes a register of imposed “shoulds.” As such, figuring out what would intrinsically, as well as extrinsically, motivate museum staff, as professionals and as individuals, to want to work with community is a critical foundational element in the civic engagement process.

It is also important to note that this “wanting” needs to be coupled with responsibility. The museum can boldly tout its civic role and position only if it does so responsibly. Museum as artist is not the unmitigated creative freedom of the lone voice. It is a practice that both benefits from and is burdened by institutionality and is rather a collaboratively orchestrated and owned creativity built through responsiveness to civic issues. In the early stages of the Advisory Committee process, questions about the rationale of presenting *Without Sanctuary* at The Warhol were often raised. Grant Oliphant, director of communications at The Heinz Endowments, seemed to capture many of the Advisory Board members’ perspectives when he asked, “Why not at the Warhol?” In doing so, he also gave an important caution that the Project should “not be presented in a way that appears at all apologetic.”³⁶ This clear-voiced assertiveness was vital in our communications about the Project, but it was earned over time. Our mission as forum and risk-taker gave us our rationale; our engagement with community gave us our confidence.

2) Community advisory process

Our community advisory process for The *Without Sanctuary* Project began with engaging an experienced outside local facilitator, Robin Kaye, of Dewey & Kaye Associates. The facilitator’s scope of work included helping us to structure our perspectives internally, to clarify our ideas, and to informally consult with community leaders. We knew we wanted and needed to work with diverse community members but were unsure of the best means of approach. This initial process led to the decision to ask the community to help us present the exhibition. The facilitator assisted in setting up a small community advisory planning group to discuss the project and who could and should be included in a larger Advisory Committee. He then facilitated four advisory committee meetings, while Museum staff led several smaller subcommittees. Specific individuals, either independently or on behalf of organizations, worked with Museum staff on different aspects of display, dialogue, or programming.

³⁶ Email correspondence.

The advisory committee was large, approximately 40 people, all of whom attended the first meeting, while 25–30 attended the second and third meetings, and 20 the last. The first meeting was called with a letter of invitation, co-signed by the Museum’s director and board chair. The remaining meetings were called, and ongoing communications facilitated, through a group email distribution. Although there were a few people who attended all the meetings, most just managed to attend one or two. Some members commented that the size discouraged individuals from participating and led them to drop out.³⁷ Nevertheless, the open-ended nature of the process allowed us to maximize our outreach in a way that was appropriate for this project. The flexibility of the structure and operations of the advisory committee also enabled us to invite people, some of whom were critical of the Museum’s decision to present the project and others simply interested in participating, to join the committee at various stages of the process.

3) *Keyworkers and ambassadors*

When I first heard that the Warhol was bringing this exhibit in, I was the one who said, “who the hell do they think they are?” They heard that, so they asked me to work with them. My director thought it would be good, and they thought it was fantastic. . . . They didn’t think they could do it on their own—and this was an asset. . . .

—Interview with Race Relations
Specialist & Project Collaborator³⁸

Clearly recognizing what we did and did not know was crucial. It established mutuality between museum and community in a true sense—both needed the other. In this process, key allies were established. It was really only a core group of these allies who thoroughly engaged in every aspect of the Project. For the most part, these were people with professional affiliations to organizations whose explicit purpose was to fight racism and promote tolerance. These allies were essential; they brought their tireless energy and rich knowledge of community to the project; and, importantly, saw the benefit for their own constituencies. They were “keyworkers”:

. . . people who can help to open the door between audiences and the museum. Keyworkers may include, among others, youth workers, artists, community workers, craftspeople, adult educators, volunteers and public employees. . . . They bring knowledge, skills, experience and resources that museums and their staff in general do not have. To differing degrees they also bring their networks, a potentially important means by which access can be achieved and partnerships developed. Keyworkers have influence and responsibilities that are recognized by the target audiences museums seek to reach.”³⁹

Our keyworkers gave their advice, brainstormed, presented programs, and accessed their own networks for the Museum. They also promoted and supported the Project, an important part of which involved doing radio and TV interviews together with Museum staff. Not everyone, of course, could give this commitment, and another important role was that of ambassador. Here tasks varied, from community participants who volunteered as dialogue co-facilitators, to Advisory Committee members who simply talked up the Project with colleagues, friends, and

³⁷ Karen Knutson, *ibid.*

³⁸ Lynne Conner, *ibid.*, p. 64.

³⁹ *Museums, Keyworkers and Lifelong Learning: shared practice in five countries*, Buro fur Kulturvermittlung, Vienna, Austria, 2001, edited by Gabriele Stoger and Annette Stannett, p. 14.

associates. All of those involved supported our efforts and worked to convince others of the Project's relevance and importance. Approaching civic practice through stressing individual relationships may have the most impact on perception and engagement. Historian David Thelen makes this point in his book, *The Presence of the Past*, citing Norbert Elias's point that individuals are larger than groups because individuals contain within themselves so many different identities. An individual could be a woman, lawyer, Republican, Chicagoan, lesbian, Irish-American.⁴⁰ As such, focusing on working with specific individuals has the potential to access many communities.

4) Valuing different ways of knowing & questioning values

Valuing community experience and seeing things from their point of view is vital in the process of collaboration. This does not mean that the institution gives up control or simply does what the community wants. A key part of the community engagement process is that the museum brings its own viewpoint to the table. This also means getting over the fear of questioning others' opinions and values. Often this means engaging in potentially difficult and emotional issues and conflicts. The difficulty, as Grant Kester notes, reflecting on critical writing around collaborative art practice, is that questioning or criticizing "is often constrained by fear that one will be seen as disparaging the issues or community involved"⁴¹ and as such devalue community concerns and put the actual process of collaboration itself at risk. We need to figure out the obstacles to this kind of honesty, as it is the only way to enhance and build critical discourse around this practice. It is, however, important as museums and their staff waded out into the field of civic engagement that they fully understand and appreciate that if ultimately they are not willing to change and have what they hear influence their practice, it may be better not to go out there at all.

5) Communities of practice

It is also important to note that often in museum circles, and art museums in particular, words like "community" can have a somewhat pejorative connotation. Community engagement is at times viewed as a kind of naïve, socially invested earnestness or as dumbing-down and restrictive, or as important, but the bailiwick of one individual or department. As noted earlier, the museum is part of the community to be engaged. Here psychologist Jean Lave's notion of "communities of practice" is helpful, where the specific knowledge of any group is socio-culturally constructed. In other words, a community is created through shared practice.⁴²

A useful way of conceptualizing community engagement is: the Museum community of practice engaging with other communities of practice. "Community" in this instance, is not only vested with the overly weighty connotations of politicized minority groups with which the term is often associated in museum and other circles. It is also inclusive of everything from Little League teams and flower groups to cultural theorists. This also underlines the importance of creatively responding to different contexts. Each community may require a different approach. As such, formulaic responses may not work.

⁴⁰ David Thelen, *ibid.* p.199.

⁴¹ Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art.*

⁴² Falk and Dierking, p. 46–47.

6) Sustainable ways of working

It is fairly standard parlance these days around in the realm of community engagement and museums to hear the issues of sustainability and long-term partnerships emphasized as critical. While well-intentioned and driven by a desire to steer away from the kind of tokenistic efforts prevalent in previous decades, it is in many ways a problematic emphasis. The current rhetoric seems to lose sight of the organic way most relationships are built, individual-to-individual and organization-to-organization. Indeed, not all partnerships or relationships are, or should be, sustainable. Can you broach collaboration with openness if the goal of sustainability is predetermined? What happens if the relationships within the project do not turn out to be sustainable? Does this then mean we have failed? Often, it is the once-off, specific project that allows people to get to know one another, to work together, and through collective action build trust and relationships, and then to see possibilities for the future. Yet, this project focus would seem to run counter to the current sustainable ethos. We need to shift the emphasis from sustainable partnerships to sustainable ways of working. In this context, museums and communities can embrace working together on once-off projects or long-term initiatives. Some things might prove to be sustainable; most will not. Some relationships may be long lasting and others not. Indeed, some may simply remain as reciprocal resources to be tapped when needed. What is sustainable, or rather, what should be emphasized as key, is the museum creatively responding to and engaging community as part of its practice.

After Without Sanctuary

1) Tangible outcomes and follow-up

An important aspect of the project was generating tangible, long-term outcomes and follow-up. As a result of many visitor comments, particularly those of educators, the Museum co-published, together with Pittsburgh Public Schools, a limited number of the timeline “African American Experience: Struggle and Achievement 1895–1995” in a roll-out format for classroom use. The timeline was distributed and is being used throughout the Pittsburgh Public School District. In addition, one copy was sent to every public, private, and parochial school in the region. The Pittsburgh Urban League, as host to the National Urban League conference in Pittsburgh in July 2003, distributed a copy to every Urban League in the nation. This tangible outcome, a product to hold, point to, and be proud of, captured and documented the project’s success for all those involved. It also further solidified an already positive community impression, as well as continuing the project’s goals of reaching out and educating others.

We need to shift the emphasis from sustainable partnerships to sustainable ways of working.

Community arts projects were another form of follow-up. As a means of continuing dialogue within the community and exploring issues raised by dialogue participants, Artist/Educators developed small-scale community art projects that brought together art and dialogue. This was an important way not only to continue the dialogue but also to build and further staff competencies and to engage with the issues raised by the Project in a contemporary art context. Four projects were developed: *Free to Be*, an African American Women’s Hair Circle featuring dialogue around the rich touchstone of hair for black women; *Men’s Lives* bringing together black and white men featuring conversations, video interviews, and collaborative large-scale photographic silkscreen printing; *Striking Images* comprising discussion amongst grandparents who were raising their grandchildren and focusing on the power of personal photographs as a point of departure for exchanging personal histories; and *Scripts for Behavior*, an exploration of the issues facing today’s teens featuring dialogues and digitally-manipulated characters to depict

scenarios from their lives. An exhibition of these projects was held in the spring of 2003 at Artist Image Resource, a local arts organization with which the Museum often collaborates.

2) *Assessing impact*

What I've taken away personally from this experience is enormous. I've simply learned to think about race, something I, as a 22-year-old white woman, had not seriously considered until I began working on the exhibit. Looking at the idea of "white privilege" helped me to find language to facilitate others' experiences as well as my own.

—Museum Staff

Their writing in response to the exhibit was some of the strongest they have done.

—Teacher Interview

I'm glad I came here today—it was between this & extra sleep on a Sat. morning. This was necessary to see. Being a young, black female living in America is hard & I need to be reminded of how lucky I am that I didn't live through this. I needed to be reminded of how far we've come & how much farther we still have to go. Thank you.

—Visitor Comment Book

It wasn't hard to see [the exhibit]. Growing up I was told about lynching all the time. What was hard was knowing that others chose not to see the exhibit. They said it was too hard to see and too hard to talk about it. That was hard for me, to know that people wouldn't force themselves to go.

—Student Interview

There is significant evidence, from visitor comments as well as interviews with visitors and Advisory Committee members, to suggest a deep and far-reaching impact of The *Without Sanctuary* Project. Research and evaluation studies and

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conversations with many community leaders attest that the project galvanized energies and focused a collective attention on racial issues in a manner that was rare for Pittsburgh. Yet, it is also true that the impact seems to have been mostly felt on an individual level. For example, attempts made with Advisory Committee members to bring together political and corporate leadership to discuss citywide issues

of racism failed. Informal discussions in communities and some features in the media revealed that many people chose not to attend. How much the Project contributed to racial politics and dialogue in the long-term remains to be determined. What is clear is that the impact will best be manifested by its affect on individuals, the stories they tell, the perceptions they have, and to what degree attendance at The *Without Sanctuary* Project influenced their behavior. The above comments as well as many others gathered through the Project and afterwards reflect a range of responses, personal resonances, and commitments to change. From the Museum's vantage point, it truly succeeded in its stated goal of providing a vital forum for diverse publics and local communities. The project generated a tremendous amount of good will toward, and respect for, the Museum. Considering its mission and the directions for its future programming, this can only reap positive benefits and is now a valued resource. Conversely, many community members now see the Museum as a resource. Internally, the project generated a sense of playing a truly important purpose in the community. It also built staff competencies and opened the Museum up to the possible benefits and enjoyment of working with community on projects

in such a direct, museum-wide, and integrated way. One manifestation of this was *Youth Invasion 2002*, which built on some of the strategies employed in *The Without Sanctuary Project*. *Youth Invasion* was a multifaceted community engagement program where teens were empowered to take over the Museum with their “take” on Warhol. The program included displays of youth artwork and youth-curated exhibitions, programs, and publications. Now a highly successful annual program, funded by The National Endowment for the Arts in 2004, the “project” nature of *Youth Invasion*, its impact on the gallery environment, its development by a teen committee together with Museum staff from different departments, and, especially, the Museum’s openness to such a project, was made possible by the lessons learned during *Without Sanctuary*.

It is, however, important to note that the success of *Without Sanctuary* would not have been possible without the considerable foundational experience of past programs and projects, albeit smaller in scale. The Project grew out of an evolving practice, ranging from hosting mayoral debates to experimentation with display and interpretation practices. Subsequent exhibition-based projects have explored themes related to the lynching images: *Andy Warhol’s Electric Chairs: Reflecting on Capital Punishment in America*, June 28–November 1, 2003, developed with an advisory committee, and *Inconvenient Evidence: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib*, September 17– December 5, 2004. Although the scale of the community involvement is less all-encompassing than with *The Without Sanctuary Project*, an ongoing practice of different kinds of community engagement continues, such as an exploration of collective memory through a cross-generational sampling of audio interviews reflecting on the presidency and assassination of John F. Kennedy in conjunction with the exhibition *November 22nd 1963: Image, Memory, Myth*. Material from all these projects is presented on the Museum’s website www.warhol.org. The Museum is in the process of prototyping various strategies in conjunction with a planned reinstallation and reinterpretation of the permanent collection. Other initiatives are also underway.

ANDY WARHOL’S ELECTRIC CHAIRS: REFLECTING ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN AMERICA

About six months following the success of *Without Sanctuary*, the Museum was approached by Amnesty International to work with them in relation to their national conference to be held in Pittsburgh, April 4–6, 2003. Initial discussions emphasized the desire to have dialogues and to create sustainable outcomes, in particular to collaborate on the development of educational curriculum and a possible exhibition around the death penalty using Andy Warhol’s *Electric Chair* paintings and prints.

Importantly, this project offered an opportunity to apply our “dialogue” knowledge to connect issues of social concern and civic dialogue with powerful examples of Warhol’s work. Here, in contrast to the *Without Sanctuary* images, the art is cultural document *and* aesthetic work, raw material *and* symbolic object. Yet, while the lynching images effected a deep “unburying” amongst viewers, how would Warhol’s seemingly cool images engender dialogue? Also, *Without Sanctuary* was about exploring unacknowledged historical events that speak to people’s contemporary experience in order to teach and learn from the past. All involved would agree that lynching was unconscionable. Capital punishment, however, is very much an issue in the present and one that is highly controversial and polarizing. There are those, including many African American participants in our *Without Sanctuary* dialogues, who described capital punishment as a “form of contemporary lynching.” Others saw it as an appropriate legal and moral sanction for terrible crimes. This project would further explore the museum as forum in concept and practice. If we are to truly embrace the notion of being a “forum,” undertaking this

endeavor would really challenge us to adopt a multipartial role and to engage diverse perspectives on this issue, particularly when many staff are anti-death penalty, coupled with the wider perception of the Museum as a left-leaning institution that would be naturally anti-capital punishment. In this case bringing multiple perspectives together would be the most difficult, but arguably the more provocative, course of action.

The Images

Warhol's art is charged with incongruity and paradox, he contends that "the less something has to say, the more perfect it is." Despite this preference, his own art has boundless scope, for whatever it has to say; it always says the reverse as well.

—Charles F. Stuckey, art critic ⁴³

Begun in the 1960s, the *Electric Chair* series is based on a photograph of the electric chair at New York's notorious Sing Sing prison. Warhol used the same image for all his works in this series, only varying the way he cropped it or the background colors he used. The simple image of the empty electric chair, centrally fixed amidst an execution chamber devoid of human presence, is one of the most iconic of Warhol's artworks. How do we read these artworks? Do they, as one critic noted, "offer a home for any set of prejudices the viewer might hold?"⁴⁴ Or, do they reflect, as another wrote, "that state of moral and emotional anesthesia which, like it or not, probably tells us [. . . the] truth about the realities of the modern world?"⁴⁵ Did Warhol, as one of his biographers suggests, think that the electric chair simply reflected a "typically American way to go"⁴⁵ and as such was as American as Campbell's soup, Marilyn Monroe, and Coca-Cola?

Deliberately evasive about his intentions, Warhol's *Electric Chair* paintings and prints are powerful works precisely because they are open to multiple interpretations.

The Presentation

The resulting exhibition, *Andy Warhol's Electric Chairs: Reflecting on Capital Punishment in America*, ran from June 28 through November 1, 2003. It presented Warhol's print series of *Electric Chairs*, encompassing ten large-scale prints in diverse colors, double-hung together with several smaller prints and paintings of the same image. Interpretive material was developed in conjunction with various Advisory Committee members and featured contextual information around capital punishment written by various committee members, from a Judge who has presided in death penalty cases, to PhD candidates in history, diverse audio points of view, opportunities for visitors to write their own response to the artwork and the issue, and handmade zines available for visitors to take home. The zines were created by visitors together with the Museum's Artist/Educators in the open studio program, The Weekend Factory. They were small booklets with a photographic, silk-screened cover image of an electric chair and consisted of contextual information, questions, points of view, artists' projects, and visitor responses and drawings. The simultaneous preciousness and photocopied/mass-produced feel of the zines reflected Warhol's artistic practice. Five different issues were created during the run of the exhibition. Additional programming included a youth event with performances and dialogues, a panel discussion, and a small number of school group visits, specifically with teachers

⁴³ Charles Stuckey, "Warhol: Backwards and Forwards," *Flash Art* # 101 (January/February 1981) cited in *The Critical Response to Andy Warhol*, edited by Alan Pratt, London: Greenwood Press, 1997, p 140.

⁴⁴ Steven Kurtz, "Uneasy Flirtations: The Critical Reaction to Warhol's Concepts of Celebrity and Glamour," cited in *The Critical Response to Andy Warhol*, edited by Alan Pratt, London: Greenwood Press, 1997, p 254.

⁴⁵ David Bourdon, *Warhol*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989, p 154.

interested in developing and field-testing curriculum. The exhibition and accompanying programs were presented in collaboration with Amnesty International USA's Human Rights Education Program and Mid-Atlantic Regional Office (MARO), the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, Duquesne University School of Law, The Center for Victims of Violent Crime, The Public Conversations Project, and an exhibition community advisory committee.

Many of the same points around creative, dialogic, and civic practice, considered in relation to the *Without Sanctuary* Project are true for this project as well. There are, however, some additional distinctions between both projects to note.

Art Museums and Advocacy

One of the key areas where this difference played itself out is our understanding of the role of an institution within the political realm. Is there a place for advocacy? If so, how should that manifest itself? What is the relationship between the Museum and advocacy groups? Are they interested in dialogue? In the larger sphere of art and art museums, how are, what tend to be left-leaning programmatic practices aligned with what is often right-leaning governance? From the vantage point of programming and dialogue, how do we engage those who perceive a bias or disagree with, more often than not, liberal tenets? Who do we alienate in the process if we do?

...it was our firm belief that it was important to signal to broader publics that the Museum was not taking sides in the presentation.

When Amnesty approached the Museum, they obviously intended for dialogue initiatives to ultimately support their advocacy ends. It was when the reality of the museum as forum meant sharing the stage with pro-death penalty points of view that their official support of the project came into question and generated considerable internal debate within the organization. As an abolitionist organization that fundamentally believes the death penalty is morally and criminally wrong, the advocacy wing argued that, even though they understood the educational value in the project, acknowledging the other side, and in essence participating with them, gives their views credence and validity. It is as if the death penalty is something debatable. For them there is no pro or con; the death penalty is a violation of human rights. They also felt that, inevitably, arguments against the death penalty get pitted against victims' families' emotions, and in such an emotional realm they cannot argue. From their standpoint, no one would rationally support the death penalty once they knew the facts of an unjust legal system. The human rights education division of Amnesty, however, asserted that from a public education perspective, it was important to be engaged in these kinds of discussions. They noted that it is often only as a participant amongst other voices that their advocacy voice can be heard, beyond the choir, to ultimately effect change. The alternative might be no forum at all. This debate happened internally within Amnesty. As the AGM and possible exhibition/project drew closer, the intensity of the discussions increased. The opposition seemed to take the coordinators with whom I was working by surprise, and they were somewhat overwhelmed and de-energized by the process:

The reason people get overly wrought is the timing, a decision has to be made, and it becomes overly dramatic. Since you and I had realized we could not come to any resolution by the time of the AGM there was nothing. The exhibition was there without any interpretive material. The paintings were there, just sitting quietly on the walls, it was a beautiful moment for me; here they were causing all this dialogue, people were going up there and seeing nothing but the artworks, some people were out

looking for something evil but they saw nothing. After the AGM there was very little talk afterwards. It was a little dispiriting. It had all this potential that was clearly trumped by getting there.

—Interview with David Yu,
Annual General Meeting Coordinator,
Amnesty International⁴⁶

From another vantage point, in speaking with different representatives from District Attorneys' offices, there was a sense that they become the "whipping boys" for anti-death penalty activists, saying that talking to them is like "talking to a wall." Conversations with police and with researchers working in the field similarly suggested that police officers saw themselves, in a sense, as the last line of order before chaos,⁴⁷ totally underappreciated, coping with an overwhelmingly bad rap, and dealing with the realities of crime and justice, while activists functioned in the abstract. At times, some of the pro-death penalty people with whom we spoke, although willing to share their perspectives with us, were less inclined to participate in any formal way with the museum or the project. The Museum approached the Pennsylvania District Attorney's Association (PDAA), which has taken a position in favor of capital punishment, about the possibility, in addition to organizations like Amnesty, of coming on board with official and public support for the project. Following initial discussions with Amnesty, our own internal dialogue, and outside consultation, it was our firm belief that it was important to signal to broader publics that the Museum was not taking sides in the presentation. Any official support needed to include a range of organizations from different perspectives in order to communicate this openness. The PDAA were extremely concerned about how opposing points of view would be represented. For example, they were interested in ensuring that they knew exactly what statistics Amnesty would present in support of their arguments, so they, in turn, could present counter statistics.

The association didn't feel that they would have enough control to prevent this from being anti-death penalty. Control here was a significant aspect. . . . I didn't necessarily agree with the association's position and I strongly suggested that the PDAA be involved in the process. I support the death penalty. I see it as an appropriate sanction. It's the law. If we support capital punishment we should not be afraid of getting the word out about why we support it and we should step up to those challenges. The association, however, did not feel it would be a benefit to sponsor the exhibition. I think they just felt that we would be drowned out by the anti-death penalty voice no matter how it was presented.

—Interview with Mathew Mangino,
District Attorney, Lawrence County,
PDAA Capital Punishment Committee

Both Amnesty and PDAA grappled and dealt with the challenges of what their official and public support of the project meant to their own organizations. In essence, both would have to give up desiring or competing to control the terms of the dialogue. This was extremely difficult for these organizations. One is driven by an abolitionist mission and the other supports the current law for capital punishment and, as such, is less inclined or needing to advocate. One key area of conflict was not in the realm of statistics but rather the emotional register and rhetoric of the language; on the one hand, hellfire and brimstone graphic descriptions of murders, designed to generate visceral response for retribution; on the other, inventory-like descriptions of a

⁴⁶ Phone conversation with David Yu.

⁴⁷ Phone conversation with PhD history candidate Gabriele Gottlieb.

dysfunctional prison system, fraught with errors and fundamentally racist, aimed at appealing to a sense of injustice and an altruistic ideal of a society founded on clemency and understanding. These registers mirror the legal process of prosecution and defense in capital cases, of presenting “aggravating and mitigating” circumstances to decide whether someone should live or die. As such, it appears the courtroom defines the terms of how capital punishment is talked about, which suggests that it may be impossible to ever get to a place of dialogue unless the issue is framed in a radically different manner.

In the midst of waiting for the organizations to decide whether or not they would be able to officially support the project, an important process of letting go took place. Similar to *Without Sanctuary*, the museum as forum became real, both as a physical place and as an idea, out there in the world. Part of this meant embracing the ambiguities and disagreements around presenting these kind of projects. The process involves shedding the missionary “but we’re doing good things” zeal in favor of a sort of caring provocateur role, one that enjoys that things cannot be governed by our intentions. As noted by consultant and meeting facilitator, Maggie Herzig, from the Public Conversations Project, a public supporter of the exhibition, there are several different kinds of advocates, and not all of them wish or are able to embrace functioning in a dialogue situation—and may often be best left to their skills of advocacy.⁴⁸ Ultimately, PDAA declined and Amnesty gave official support through their Human Rights Education Division.

Embracing the grey areas and the complexities amidst the polarized positions of pro or con proved at times to be a lonely place.

Approximately forty people were invited to be part of the Advisory Committee, of which thirty came to the first meeting and fifteen to the second. Many members contributed to the audio and/or written points of view and panel texts in the exhibition. Others served on subcommittees for programming and curriculum. However, in contrast to *Without Sanctuary* with its educational history lesson and message of “never again,” the Museum’s emphasis on the ambiguity of the artwork and not taking sides meant that advocacy groups and individuals, all potential “keyworkers,” were perhaps not as able to hang their agenda on the project and were, as a result, less invested. Embracing the grey areas and the complexities amidst the polarized positions of pro or con proved at times to be a lonely place. It is clear, however, from the many visitor comments that people explored the artworks and the issue with great thoughtfulness and the numerous exit evaluation surveys conducted over the summer for the entire Museum revealed the exhibition as a definite highlight that “made you think.”

Museum as Artist/Interventionist/Researcher

Much of the “dialogue” around this project took place on the phone, “off the record,” and internally among the organizations themselves, as they decided whether or not they would offer their public support. How do we capture such dialogue? Is it civic? What roles are art and the museum playing here? How much of this dialogue shaped the ultimate outcome? What impact did it have? As suggested in the context of *Without Sanctuary*, here, similarly, the museum seemed to be functioning as an artist in community, in this case employing interventionist strategies. Warhol, his *Electric Chair* series, and the Museum melded into one idea: provoking discussion, concern, insight, and expression. All of this centered on the various moral, emotional, and socio-cultural issues underpinning the capital punishment debate. Most of the conversations always began with a discussion of the artwork; some were familiar with the work,

⁴⁸ Conversation with Maggie Herzig referencing a Bill Moyers article.

others not. Familiar or not, it was, nevertheless, the table by which we were able to have the conversation. Many of these lasted a long time, where one had the sense that people were working through the issues themselves or using the opportunity for their own dialogue outreach. Others were conference calls with multiple voices and concerns. As representatives of the Museum, we felt immensely privileged to gradually gain insight into the worlds of those who deal with violent crime, law enforcement, social justice, and advocacy around this issue. All of this informed the development and shaping of the Advisory Committee and the nature of the exhibition and the accompanying programming.

Being Dialogic & Not Doing “Dialogue”

The most successful dialogue avenues tended to be the more informal approaches. At the beginning of the exhibition, we did try to pull together a formal series of public dialogues by encouraging the Advisory Committee members to convene small groups to bring to the Museum for a dialogue. This, however, did not prove to be a successful strategy, as the interest of the committee members was not there and we would not have been able to coordinate this without their enthusiasm. Conversations with some Advisory Committee members revealed a range of reactions, symptomatic of the fact that “dialogue” can be off-putting for many people. For example, after being asked by the facilitator at our first Advisory Committee meeting to “listen with resilience,” First Assistant District Attorney good-humoredly gestured to his longtime friend and rival, a criminal defense attorney, also at the meeting, saying that he was “incapable of listening with resilience.” This amusingly brought to the fore the traditionally adversarial practice of the legal profession which they obviously both enjoy with a certain competitive relish. Busy professionals are often more than willing to bring their expertise to a project, but it is generally more effective when it is task oriented and/or where they see a direct personal benefit—either professional, educational, or entertainment. Their time is limited. For these professionals, there can often be a perception that dialogue is “just sitting around and chatting” and that they “simply do not have time.”

I think they will be a waste of time and energy unless the conversations are guided by people who have a great deal of knowledge about the death penalty. (Such groups are not necessarily educational; dialogue can easily reproduce ignorance.)⁴⁹

Another undercurrent is that “dialogue” is an emotional process of collective sharing that is fundamentally informed by a psychological/therapeutic model, and therefore is not informative or educational; based on assumptions of what does or doesn’t constitute learning or dialogue. We are still very much a culture of authority. Many amongst the educated, professional middle class would much rather sit in a dark room and listen to a lecture than be inveigled to share their reactions. It would be curious to note how many culture or advocacy professionals who plan dialogues would actually participate in such programs themselves. However much of an issue or problem this may be is debatable. It does point to a certain discomfort with the perceived format and connotations of dialogue. This may be informed by a range of possible factors: an anxiety of revelation or loss of authority; cultural paradigms or individual preferences that champion or favor individual over collective opinion; an experience and learning environment that people are not used to or that feels unnatural or too touchy-feely; and a perceived lack of rigor, intellect, or depth in the sharing of opinions. Whatever the discomfort around “dialogue,” it should not be ignored. As we seek out effective forms of engaging wide-ranging participation, perhaps it is best to shift away from “dialogue” programs per se to ways of

⁴⁹ Email correspondence with Marcus Rediker, professor of history, University of Pittsburgh, and anti-death penalty activist.

being dialogic, from structured approaches to group gatherings, to more interventionist strategies. Using art and/or a museum project as the table around which people can gather for a conversation may be one way of doing this.

CONCLUSIONS

Is all of this civic dialogue? Much of the dialogue generated by this project was, for the most, part unstructured. Yet, any review of responses suggests that people are clearly dealing with the civic as they grapple with the ideas and issues evoked by the imagery, and with being human and a citizen in contemporary society. Public institutions may play their most significant role in society's civic life by using their public position to encourage self-inquiry at the most personal level. As we strive toward civic engagement, we are perhaps at our best when we function as a public space for private reflections that are in turn made public. To affect this engaged social space we draw on a rich mix of creative, dialogic, and civic practices. The museum as artist embraces multiple new roles—provocateur, catalyst, creative producer, and facilitator—coupled with the traditional ones of educating and researching, documenting, preserving, collecting, and interpreting material culture. It is not *either/or* but rather *both/and*. As an artist, the museum can effect an attitudinal shift, dust off its traditional practices, and be freer to play with how, for whom, and for what we present, display, and create exhibitions and programs. Engaged in civic practice, the museum directs that artistic freedom to “the civic,” to the joys and struggles of being human, part of a community, and a citizen in contemporary society. This brings about a marriage of art and public space, a forum to foreground multiple perspectives and reflect life in its complexity. As a dialogic museum, we not only open up our spaces to multiple voices; we also open up how and with whom we interpret to a more dynamic kind of curatorial synthesis as we attempt to make meaning of art and society *together with* our audiences.

* * *

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