

PUBLIC FACES, PRIVATE LIVES:
MAKING VISIBLE SILICON VALLEY'S HYBRID HERITAGE

CASE STUDY: MACLA/MOVIMIENTO DE ARTE
Y CULTURA LATINO AMERICANA

LYNN E. STERN

PREFACE

In September 2002 MACLA, a San José-based Latino contemporary arts space, premiered *Ties that Bind: Exploring the Role of Intermarriage Between Latinos and Asians in Silicon Valley*. This exhibition was a photography-based installation of new work by artists Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn that reflected on the history of Asian-Latino intermarriage and contemporary perceptions of ethnicity in the San José area. Capitalizing on the groundswell of public interest in ethnic and racial hybridization trends borne out by Census 2000, the *Ties that Bind* exhibition and dialogues sought to engage a broad cross section of San José residents in civic dialogue about how Asian-Latino intermarriages in Silicon Valley are challenging the prevailing myths of ethnic identity. To propel the artistic process and spur dialogue around this timely and provocative civic issue, MACLA devised a “humanities-based” model of community intervention that integrated the ethnographic methodologies of oral history, archival research and social science scholarship with the artistic development process. As part of that effort, MACLA collected and documented 45 case studies of Asian-Latino intermarriage and engaged 15 of those families to participate directly as oral history interviewees and subjects of the artist’s photographic process.

This examination of the making of *Ties that Bind* offers insights into MACLA’s use of an ethnographic-based curatorial approach to drive the project’s artistic development, and reveals how the project team wrestled with ethical and aesthetic considerations in the process of rendering the participating families’ personal stories into art. It also chronicles challenges and insights gained along the way that prompted key changes in the design of the project, namely an increased role for the artists and a shift in the scope of the dialogue component. The project and case study also raise key questions about the nature of civic dialogue: Does civic dialogue necessarily need to be “public”? How does the intent to foster civic dialogue affect aesthetic choices? Finally, *Ties that Bind* also sheds light on MACLA’s own quest as a community-based arts group to embrace a long-term commitment to civic dialogue and to embed those practices in the organization.

WE ARE FAMILY: EXPLORING INTERMARRIAGE AMONG SILICON VALLEY'S ASIANS AND LATINOS

There's this myth of Asians as the model minority in contrast to that of Latinos as a group with deficiencies. We want to understand and dispel these stereotypes. The love forged between these couples contradicts such polarizations.

—Maribel Alvarez, *San José Mercury News*,
November 26, 2001

MACLA/Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana is a contemporary alternative arts space recognized nationally for cutting edge multidisciplinary programming that gives voice to San José's vibrant Latino community. MACLA emerged in 1989 out of efforts by community activists to establish a Latino arts presence in downtown San José and to advocate for greater representation of multicultural artists in the city's arts allocations. Its mission—to promote, preserve, and enhance the Latino multidisciplinary arts through the support and presentation of new work by Latino artists—is realized through a robust roster of programs in the visual arts, performance, literature and youth arts education that affirm and challenge Latino identity and speak to themes of relevance to the San José community. While ethnically-specific in outlook, MACLA takes a cross-cultural perspective in defining its community and strives to engage Latinos and non-Latinos alike in its programming.

MACLA's "community" is in constant flux, and defies traditional demographic categorizations. As California's third largest city and the "capital" of Silicon Valley, San José (and the surrounding Santa Clara County) has an ever-changing face that reflects the successive waves of ethnic, immigrant and refugee populations that have always been a defining feature of this area's history. Once an agriculturally rich region that attracted immigrant farm laborers, San José is now a magnet for Latino, Indian and Southeast Asian populations seeking employment opportunities in the high-tech industry. Statistics paint a vivid portrait of the city's changing demographic make-up. As noted in a recent study on immigrant participatory arts in Silicon Valley, non-Latino whites comprised 80% of the city's population in the 1970s; today this group accounts for less than 30% of San José's residents.¹ San José is home to more people of Vietnamese origin than any other city outside of Vietnam and to more Indian people than any other city outside of India.²

Yet, beneath the striking racial and ethnic mosaic of San José's residents lies a more complex history of Silicon Valley's multicultural character. For MACLA's then executive director, Maribel Alvarez, that history surfaced in anecdotes shared by friends and acquaintances about love stories between Asians and Latinos, Silicon Valley's two largest cultural groups. These personal stories of mixed heritage Asian-Latinos were striking for the ways in which they contradicted prevailing notions of ethnic assimilation in California, such as the myth that Asian and Latino communities emerged largely in isolation from one another. This myth was reinforced by the state's legal legacy of anti-miscegenation and segregation. The notion that Asians and Latinos have experienced America as closed ethnic enclaves was further buttressed in large measure by the media, which cast Latinos and Asians at opposite ends of the ethnic assimilation spectrum by singling out Asians as the "model minority" while portraying Latinos as members of a community facing serious social and economic deficiencies.

¹ Pia Moriarty, *Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight into Community-Building in Silicon Valley*, p. 15

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Making Visible Silicon Valley's Hybrid Heritage

Intrigued by these anecdotes of Asian-Latino marriages and the larger story they revealed about the impact of these two minorities on the creation and transformation of Silicon Valley, Alvarez conceived in 1997 *Ties that Bind*, a multi-disciplinary, photographic, oral history and public dialogue project designed to investigate the history of intermarriage among Asians and Latinos and to bring to light contemporary perceptions of ethnic identity. Drawing on MACLA's programmatic strengths in photography and community documentation, the project would mine the community's "social memory" to reconstruct this little known aspect of Silicon Valley's cultural history. In doing so, the project would inject into public discourse a more nuanced, open-ended concept of ethnic identity in the U.S., one that, as Alvarez writes, would challenge generalized notions of ethnicity as a box-like, static category of identity:

Ties that Bind ...seeks to illuminate the ways in which ethnicity in our country, far from being a hermetically sealed, neatly packaged phenomenon, is made up of multiple strands of shared history, bonds of affection, and common aspirations. It is the purpose of this project to demonstrate that on the margins of most contemporary "discourses" on diversity, race, and multiculturalism, hides a radical humanist proposition: our identities are deeply intertwined with one another, "our" American story has always been a collective narrative.³

Support from Animating Democracy in 2000 provided MACLA the opportunity and resources to bring Alvarez's vision of *Ties that Bind* to fruition. In undertaking *Ties that Bind*, MACLA would "make visible" Silicon Valley's hybrid heritage, thereby inserting this timely and provocative civic issue—how intermarriage among Asians and Latinos in Silicon Valley is reshaping conventional notions of ethnic identity—into a broader community conversation.

Artistic and Dialogic Interests

The primary artistic strategy set forth by MACLA was the organization of a photography-based exhibition of new work that tells the story of intermarriage and contemporary inter-ethnic relations in Silicon Valley. Toward that end, MACLA was deeply interested in generating new artistic work around a model of "humanities-based" community intervention, a cross-disciplinary framework that "married" art and anthropology. To carry out the project's artistic dimension, MACLA would "borrow" ethnographic methodologies—oral history, archival-based research and social science scholarship—to generate the raw material for the artistic work.

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MACLA's ethnographic-based curatorial approach consisted of three key elements: photography, oral history, and dialogue. When the project was conceived, MACLA's plan was to assemble a team of student ethnographers and scholars to conduct oral history interviews with mixed heritage families and gather interviewees' family photographs and artifacts, as well as pertinent materials from local archives. A team of artists would be commissioned to conduct photographic sessions with the participating families. Based on those photographs, as well as the body of textual and visual information assembled by the ethnographic team, the artists would then render an artistic representation of the project's findings for the exhibition.

³ MACLA Application to Animating Democracy, 2000. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from key participants are drawn from MACLA reports to Animating Democracy.

Their installations would also be informed by a series of structured community dialogues around issues of “hybrid heritage.”

MACLA envisioned three occasions for dialogue. First, it imagined a set of structured community dialogues with self-identified residents of Asian-Latino heritage that would help spawn raw material—personal memories and insights—for the artistic process. A second set of more public events would aim to engage San José residents in dialogue about the challenges that Asian-Latino intermarriage present to prevailing myths of ethnicity.

MACLA also regarded its participation in Animating Democracy as an important opportunity to test key assumptions about arts-based civic dialogue practices and to increase its capacity to conduct that work. Through the realization of *Ties that Bind*, MACLA would investigate the

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concept of social memory and its role in helping communities grapple with their sense of place and identity in an era of globalization and hybridization. It would also demonstrate how an arts organization can mobilize social memory through art to spark dialogue within and between communities.

Finally, MACLA’s participation in Animating Democracy came at a propitious moment in its organizational history, when MACLA’s leadership began to realign resources to more

effectively foster community engagement through its programs. With the hiring in 1999 of program directors in the visual arts and literary arts, MACLA had taken an important step toward institutionalizing an interdisciplinary approach to its programming. *Ties that Bind* presented MACLA with its first multi-year initiative that integrated all three of its program areas—visual, literary and educational—and provided an opportunity to generate new art works and to build knowledge and expertise in community engagement practices. MACLA also envisioned the project as solidifying its emerging reputation within the community as a small, high caliber alternative art space engaged in cross-cultural work that speaks to the relevant themes of civic life.

THE MAKING OF TIES THAT BIND: BRINGING PRIVATE LIVES INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

There is something almost sacred about listening and recording people’s life stories. Some people have been waiting all their lives to tell their stories, those often unheard and unknown. By asking people to tell their stories we were bearing witness to unseen lives. By asking to see family pictures and artifacts we were acknowledging their importance. With many people this opened the way to a more detailed accounting of their family’s story.

There is power in putting into words a family history, a celebration of existence. For myself as an interviewer, and for the artists that accompanied me to interviewees’ homes, listening to these stories was a humbling experience.

—Luz Guerra
Project Dialogue Consultant

In December 2000, the U.S. Commerce Department’s Census Bureau released the first results of the Census 2000, revealing the seismic population shifts that were transforming America’s

demographic make-up. California figured prominently in these pattern shifts, specifically as an epicenter for trends in ethnic and racial hybridization. Compared with the U.S. population as a whole, California residents were twice as likely to identify themselves as persons of two or more mixed races in Census 2000. Within California, Census data revealed that intermarriage rates in the Bay Area were twice the national average and that 60% of all the state's mixed race births occurred in Santa Clara County.

For MACLA, the timing of the release of Census 2000 could not have been better. The anecdotes of Asian-Latino love stories that formed the basis of *Ties that Bind* were now borne out by statistical evidence. Not only did the release of the Census lend greater relevance and credence to the civic issue that *Ties that Bind* was designed to address, it also propelled the project into the spotlight. *San José Mercury News* ran a feature story on *Ties that Bind* that placed the project within a broader social context and helped underscore MACLA's role as an art organization on the cutting edge of a timely civic issue of considerable import for the San José community.

The *Ties that Bind* Project Team

MACLA assembled a core project team of scholars, artists and ethnographers who brought a range of expertise and experience to *Ties that Bind*. MACLA's executive director Maribel Alvarez, an anthropologist by training, served as project director and MACLA's curator/director of visual arts Anjee Helstrup served as project curator. Ethnographer and dialogue practitioner Luz Guerra joined the team as dialogue consultant and Wayne Maeda, professor of ethnic studies at California State University in Sacramento, served as project scholar/consultant. After involving out-of-town artists in the preliminary stages of the project, MACLA decided to engage San José-based artists who would be able to sustain the kind of relationship with families necessary for the project's success. Two local artists served as the project's artists-in-residence: Lissa Jones, a mid-career artist of Chinese and Armenian descent, and Jennifer Ahn, a photographer and first-generation American of Korean heritage.



Overview of the *Ties that Bind* exhibition.

Research and Development Phase (2000-2001)

Over the course of two years, *Ties that Bind* unfolded in two phases: a research and development phase and an implementation phase. The research and development phase activities included: extensive outreach to identify Asian-Latino participants; convening of scholars; collection and review of Census data and related material; design and pre-test of questionnaires; and design of the Website. The following key activities and outcomes occurred during this first phase:

Archival research and data collection. The project team canvassed local libraries and archival collections and made inquiries to local librarians in order to ascertain the extent to which community “social memory” of Asian-Latino intermarriage had been documented. That initial scan revealed a dearth of archival documentation and general knowledge on the subject, confirming the project's initial assumption that anecdotal

evidence of Asian-Latino intermarriage forms a large part of Silicon Valley's social history that has yet to be told.

Outreach to potential Asian-Latino participants. In gathering stories, the project team wanted to design a process that was responsive to community needs and priorities, rather than driven by a preconceived hypothesis to be proven through selective interviews. Consequently, the project team agreed from the outset to be flexible and creative in its application of ethnographic methodology in order to reach Asian-Latino families who, by self-selection, expressed interest in telling their stories.

The project team deployed a number of outreach strategies to “find” potential Asian-Latino participants, including announcements on the Web and in the local newspaper, and on flyers posted throughout the community. The team designed a project Website and on-line survey for data collection. An interview questionnaire was developed and four pilot interviews were conducted with potential participants.

Convenings of scholars, artists and project participants. Two seminars were convened during the research phase that brought together scholars, artists and project participants to help frame key issues within the topic of Asian-Latino intermarriage. A number of potentially difficult issues surfaced: 1) the history of prejudice and laws against intermarriage or “miscegenation;” 2) the recent anti-immigration sentiment as manifested by the support of a significant numbers of Californian voters for anti-immigration ballot propositions and legislation; and 3) economic inequalities among the state's different ethnic groups, made more pronounced by the “digital divide” and its direct impact on ethnic/labor segmentation in Silicon Valley.

“Learning Challenges”: Re-thinking the Project's Original Artistic and Dialogic Approaches

The research and development phase laid the groundwork for the implementation of *Ties that Bind* by aggregating available research and data on Asian-Latino intermarriage, developing and testing an outreach process to elicit stories from Asian-Latino families, and identifying key themes within the project's civic issue for further exploration. This phase also brought to the surface a layer of unanticipated complexities—what MACLA termed “learning challenges”—that prompted the project team to re-think key assumptions about the artists' role in the project and the function of dialogue in exploring the project's civic issue.

Empowering the artist as ethnographer

To realize the project's ethnographic-based approach to artmaking, MACLA conceptualized a research strategy that deployed artists and ethnographers in two distinct roles. As originally conceived, MACLA would assemble a team of student ethnographers and scholars to conduct oral history interviews with Asian-Latino families and gather interviewees' family photographs and artifacts, as well as pertinent materials from local archives. That body of textual and visual information would be made available to the artists who, in turn, would conduct additional photographic sessions with the families to generate enough material to render an artistic representation of the project's findings for an exhibition.

...the social scientists and artists did not necessarily share the same values and sensibilities in their approach to the project.

Six months after the launch of *Ties that Bind*, however, project director Maribel Alvarez realized that the project's

original research approach did not consider the artists' need for direct engagement in gathering the "raw data" as a key component of their creative process. Moreover, the social scientists and artists did not necessarily share the same values and sensibilities in their approach to the project. As Alvarez explains:

The primary flaw of the original artistic approach consisted of the lack of direct involvement by the artists in generating the material that would constitute the basis for the creation of new artistic interpretations. In other words, failing to empower the artist as ethnographer, we were creating layers of separation between the "raw data" of the project and the end-product of artistic interpretation. Very early on in the project we realized that scholars and students would not be well equipped to function as translators of social science data towards artistic ends. In addition to facing multiple difficulties in securing the kind of commitment from scholars and students required to carry out the kind of extensive engagement demanded by a project of this nature, we realized that social scientists and artists had two very distinct, and at times competing, lenses through which they approached the issue at hand. For instance, for social science, the question of "validity" of the research depended largely of the kinds of cohorts designed to filter the raw data (i.e. demographic variety within the group of interviewees). For the artist, however, the themes of memory, affection, and identity carried more weight as a collective symbolic commonality across interviewees than the specifics of data collecting.

In re-thinking the project's research strategy, MACLA made the crucial decision to "empower the artist as ethnographer": that is, the artists would be directly involved from the outset in conducting oral history interviews with families. To support the artists' expanded role in the project, each artist was accompanied by a member of the core project team on the initial visit with each family. Thereafter, the artists cultivated their own relationship with each family and developed the materials and ethnographic research they deemed necessary to nurture their artistic intervention.

Since a sustained relationship between artist and participating families played a key role in the project's success, MACLA recognized that the artist residencies would require a greater level of commitment in terms of time and personal engagement. Because two out-of-town artists initially approached by MACLA to form the project's artistic team were already finding that time constraints limited their participation, MACLA decided that an all-local artist team would be better positioned to sustain relationships with the families and provide the continuity necessary for the project's overall success. With Jones as lead artist involved with the project since its inception, MACLA selected San José photographer Jennifer Ahn to join Jones as the project's artistic team.

Providing opportunities for intra-group dialogue among Asian-Latino families

In addition to reframing the project's artistic approach, MACLA also recast the project's dialogue component based on insights that emerged out of the two seminars and pilot interviews. While the Asian-Latino love stories collected from pilot interviews were largely celebratory in tone, they were also intermingled with difficult and painful memories around intermarriage as a social phenomenon. As articulated at the project's two seminars, many couples' experience of intermarriage were shaped by a cluster of issues, including the lingering social stigma rooted in the California's legacy of anti-miscegenation laws; the recent groundswell of anti-immigration sentiment; and economic inequalities among the state's different ethnic

groups. These experiences brought to light what MACLA termed as the “affective dimensions” of hotly contested social changes taking place throughout the state. They also formed an alternative narrative that MACLA recognized would be important for the project to bring into focus. Furthermore, as the project team began contacting families identified through the on-line survey, they learned of interviewees’ desire to talk with other Asian-Latino families about the critical issues surrounding intermarriage.

Based on these insights, MACLA decided to incorporate into the project’s dialogue component two intra-group dialogues among Asian-Latino families. In contrast to the two public dialogue events, which aimed to increase awareness among the general public about intermarriage in California, these dialogues would foster community-building and networking within the set of participating families, as well as affirm and validate their alternative histories.

Ties that Bind confronted MACLA with theoretical and aesthetic challenges it had never before faced. The “learning challenges” that emerged mid-way through *Ties that Bind* compelled MACLA to question the project’s cross-disciplinary framework and reconcile the competing values of social science and art. In the end, as Alvarez explains:

It may seem odd that an organization like MACLA, that has so many years of experience in community-based arts programming, may have faced as many “learning challenges” in this project as it has. However, the bulk of these difficulties relate to the fact that this artistic project takes a social science/humanities premise as a point of departure, hence the project sought the involvement of multiple non-arts based partners and approaches. In the end, we feel the *Ties that Bind* project marks an important moment in the life and vision of MACLA and its relationship to the community. Although the research stage of the project led us in the end to a less academic rigorous “data gathering” process than originally envisioned, we feel that the project’s objectives have been better served by these adjustments and the learning has been more relevant and true to the goals of Animating Democracy.

Implementation Phase (2001-2002)

Within a revised framework, MACLA embarked on the implementation phase of *Ties that Bind*. The key activities included: 1) data collection through online survey, oral history interviews, and ethnographic and artistic interventions utilizing photography; 2) creation of new artworks; 3) presentation of an exhibition and the commissioning of reflexive writings for the catalogue; and 4) execution of intra-group dialogue among the families and public dialogue events.



Detail from “Bathroom” installation by Lissa Jones.

The project’s ethnographic activity included gathering oral histories, photographs and personal artifacts as “raw data” for the artwork. Initial data was derived from self-identified Asian-Latino families and individuals who filled out the project’s Web-based questionnaire. From the information provided by those respondents, MACLA collected and documented 45 case studies of Asian-Latino intermarriage that represented a wide spectrum of cross-cultural unions: Pakistani-Mexican, Vietnamese-Guatemalan, Filipino-Panamanian, Korean-Mexican, and Japanese-Mexican, among others. Out of this group, MACLA selected 15 families for in-depth follow-up over a six-month period. These activities included visits to participants’ homes by interviewers

and artists, structured taped interviews, and in-depth photographic documentation of each of the families. In her catalogue essay, ethnographer and dialogue consultant Luz Guerra offers a glimpse into how these encounters between the families and the interviewers and artists typically unfolded:

Part of the work of gathering stories is going to the home of strangers and asking them to let you into the private moments of their lives. The simple ritual of sitting in someone's living room is one that opens doors as you look at family photos and collected objects displayed on walls and coffee tables. Beverages are offered, you ask your hosts if you may tape the conversation, the first words are exchanged.

The 45 case studies and in-depth follow-up with 15 families generated a wealth of information—family histories, personal accounts and memories—about the nature of “hybrid heritage” in the lives of Asian-Latino families. In culling the data and interviews, the project team identified key “findings,” many of which reinforced the ideas that surfaced during the project's research and development phase. In her essay for the exhibit's catalogue, Alvarez summarizes the main themes extrapolated from the project's ethnographic-based inquiry:

They [the families and individuals] told us that cultural differences can be real and difficult to negotiate; that cultural differences are intentionally downplayed to make relationships work; that ethnic identity is very important for them and their children; that ethnic identity fades into a more generic and hybrid “American” identity over time; that being “ethnic” was about holding on to specific traditions and symbols; that being “ethnic” was about keeping only the essential ties to memory (and food), and that everything else is negotiable.

Artists Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn engaged in repeated visits and conversations on their own with the participants they were photographing in order to render their artistic interpretations of the project's “findings.” In addition to scanning images from family albums and collecting family mementos and personal artifacts for the exhibit's “content,” the artists shared dinners at participants' homes and attended special family events and celebrations. As Jennifer Ahn describes in her artist's statement, the dialogic process was for her a new approach to artmaking, one that proved both professionally challenging and personally rewarding. As families shared their personal stories and possessions for her artistic interpretation, Ahn was particularly struck and heartened by the trust they invested in her as a stranger and artist:

The project was very different for me...For the first time, I came into a space that was unfamiliar in the sense that I did not know these families, but familiar in the sense that I am too in a “Ties that Bind” relationship. I was fascinated by the history of how [the families] came here as well as generations before them. I was very interested in the stories people had for me as they showed me their antique photos...and then for them to trust me with the photos to take home and scan was a great honor!

The project's implementation phase culminated in September 2002 with the premiere of *Ties that Bind* at MACLA's gallery. The exhibit featured seven installations by Jones and Ahn, each reflecting their artistic interpretations of what they saw, heard and learned through the project's dialogic process. Some of these new works were individually conceived; most were developed collaboratively. The installations ranged from photo collages in a “documentary” mode to “interpretative” pieces that integrated photographs, fragments from the oral histories and personal artifacts gathered during the course of the project. In Lissa Jones' “Bathroom,” a white pedestal sink stands against a pumpkin colored wall and is surrounded by a set of bathroom towels embroidered with quotes from the ethnographic interviews referring to cultural tensions

sometimes felt within the relationships (“When I get mad at him I’ll blame it on his culture.” “They didn’t care if she was Mexican or . . . whatever. Was she Catholic?”). In “Shadow Boxes,” Jennifer Ahn created a collection of ten shadow boxes—one for each of the participating families—that serve as miniaturized “scrapbooks” of family memories and mementos.

Renato Rosaldo, an anthropologist who accompanied the artists into the homes and later was invited to write about the project for *Animating Democracy’s* *Critical Perspectives*, noted the use of metaphor in the installations:

Certain metaphors suggested how porous cultural boundaries can be (contrary to their views at the beginning of the project). They explored what does and does not pass through (doors, strainers, towels, and the wash). Strainers with cloth on them showed that everything is not filtered through assimilation. Each generation chooses what they will and will not retain from the generation before.⁴

Several other installations explored the theme of food through the use of hanging photographs of the families, Chinese cooking utensils (such as deep fry strainers and wire food covers) and small caches of corn, beans, chilies and ginger. As Rosaldo describes it, “Food came out of the walls, from the cupboards. One could almost smell it. Food symbolized cultural mixing—salsa with soy sauce, refried beans with rice.”



Detail of “Deep Fry Strainers,” collective work.

To accompany the exhibit, MACLA produced a 17-page catalogue that it distributed free of charge to approximately 500 community members. In addition to photo documentation of the installations, the catalogue included an introductory essay by Maribel Alvarez and two essays commissioned by MACLA to provide historical context and pertinent information about Asian-Latino intermarriage. In his essay, *Ties that Bind or Ties that Blind*, Wayne Maeda placed the project’s “findings” within the scantily documented history of California’s legacy of miscegenation. Luz Guerra’s essay, *Ties that Bind: Finding Stories and Silences* described the project’s ethnographic

process, reflecting on what inspired these families to share their stories while others preferred that their stories remain untold.

With regard to the implementation of the project’s dialogue component, MACLA organized and facilitated one “intra-group dialogue” with the participating families and two public dialogue events. The family event was held at the gallery for 12 of the participating families as a preview of the exhibit. The first “public conversation” on the topic of intermarriage and social memory was held at the MACLA gallery in October 2002. That event included many of the family members whose stories were represented in *Ties that Bind*, the community scholars who supported the artists in the gathering of the ethnographic materials, the artists, and members of the community at large. A second “public conversation” about *Ties that Bind* and the changing demographics of California was sponsored by Santa Clara University’s Multicultural Center in May 2003. In addition to these two public dialogue events, MACLA partnered with KQED’s “Pacific Rim News” to produce a 30-minute special program about the topic of Asian-Latino intermarriage

⁴ Rosaldo, Renato. “The Social Life of an Art Installation.” Essay commissioned by *Animating Democracy* for *Critical Perspectives*, Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2004. www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/.

that aired in October 2002. A total of 250 people participated directly in structured “public conversations”; many more learned about the project as listeners of the KQED program.

OUTCOMES AND ANALYSIS

The primary question that we had sought to explore—about the instability of conventional categories of identity—was indeed central to all discussions that ensued, regardless of the degree of “visibility” of these discussions. The fact that visually speaking—i.e. in visual forms—it became harder to engage the same question... does not take away from the centrality of the question of identity in the project as a whole. I believe one of the enduring lessons of *Ties* pivots exactly around this paradox of dialogue: the most important stories are intimate stories, and ...the connection between the personal and the social is not simply a matter of “staging” dialogue moments, but in fact entails an arduous process of “translation” that sometimes, as in the MACLA case, can be unforeseen until you are deep into the project and people’s lives.

—Maribel Alvarez, project director

Artistic Outcomes

In view of the project’s overall artistic intent—to organize an exhibit of photography-based new work that tells the story of Asian-Latino intermarriage in Silicon Valley—*Ties that Bind* succeeded on many levels. MACLA’s use of an ethnographic-based approach to drive the artistic process, while modified mid-way through the project, resulted in the creation of affecting and accessible new art works that made visible the lives of San José’s Asian-Latino families. An important by-product of that process was a body of documented oral histories, photographs and transcripts of public conversations for future investigations by artists, scholars and local historians.

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More broadly, these artworks brought to the surface in a new way the topic of Asian-Latino intermarriage, a subject that had been largely absent from public discourse. With a particular interest in intermarriage, sociologist Michael Rosenfeld, who wrote about *Ties that Bind* for *Animating Democracy’s* Critical Perspectives, observed that the art exhibit’s geographic specificity and intimacy made the viewer feel part of the interethnic family:

We’re all part of the frontier of changing family structure. Although the literature that was produced for the *Ties that Bind* project emphasized the peculiarity and singularity of Hispanic-Asian intermarriage in San José, the art exhibit itself had a different emphasis. The *Ties that Bind* exhibit was reflexive and general rather than singular and objectifying. The exhibit hall was set up as a home, in the same scale as a typical Bay Area home, with sinks and towels and pictures and spices, and real people eating multi-ethnic food and talking. The nature of the exhibit itself made all visitors part of the interethnic family. It emphasized the general public’s participation and complicity in the changing roles of race and family in the U.S.⁵

⁵ Rosenfeld, Michael J. “Intermarriage and Public Life.” Essay commissioned by *Animating Democracy* for *Critical Perspectives*, Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2003.
www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/.

Based on the community's positive response to the exhibit, it clearly touched a responsive chord among San José residents. As Maribel Alvarez noted, approximately 2,600 visitors attended the exhibit during its two-month run in San José, making it one of the most successful exhibitions in MACLA's history. One visitor echoed the sentiment of several comments entered into the gallery log:

I think it's great that this exhibit is shedding light on issues of interracial marriages, especially that of Latino-Asian [intermarriages]. It seems to hit close to home—it's something we can relate to in San José. It's true that it has been something that never really was mentioned or talked about but was common in many households, even looking back into family histories. Growing up in San José, you see many differences between the two [Asian and Latino cultural groups] but similarities too, [that] make for an unusual kind of bond...

Ties That Bind was equally well received by the project's participating families, many of whom visited the gallery several times to show friends and families the artist's interpretations of their stories. As Maribel Alvarez noted, "For the participating families, many of whom had never been involved in any kind of artistic process before, there is no doubt that the *Ties* project meant a great deal. They openly and repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the process we utilized and their delight in the final product."

Negotiating the private and public spheres

MACLA's ethnographic-based approach to the artistic process was at once rewarding and challenging for the artists, who were charged with the difficult task of giving visual expression to the material and personal testimonies unearthed during the course of the project. In her own *Critical Perspectives* essay, Maribel Alvarez explores in retrospect how the artists were caught "in the midst of this uncomfortable yet fascinating exercise. . . asked to serve, not two, but three masters." She wrote:

MACLA asked that they "respond to the community" but still deliver a compelling visual statement using the most transparent of all art media, photography; project participants asked that they not reveal the "painful" aspects of intermarriage: for example, some of the participants were the offspring of broken inter-racial marriages and had grown up all their lives hearing one or the other parent impute racial stereotypes to their former spouse, half of whose "heritage" these children also embodied); and the artworld in which they had developed and emerged as artists asked that they "be true to their vision" and create work that "pushes the envelope" if necessary.⁶

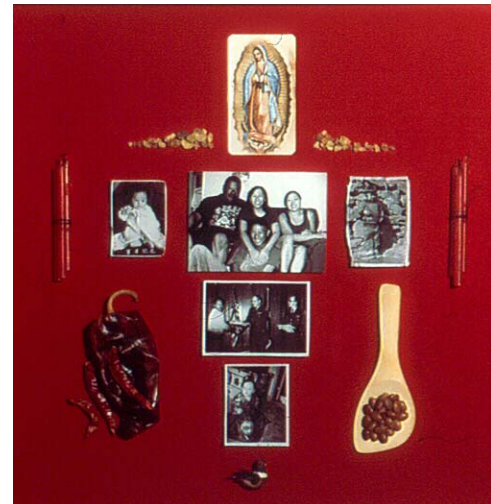
The role of artist/ethnographer certainly took on greatest complexity as some families shared difficult, often painful memories of intermarriage while others chose to portray their experiences of intermarriage in the most positive light possible. As Alvarez observed, Jones and Ahn embraced the role of "impromptu ethnographer" and performed it with remarkable sensitivity and integrity. Yet both artists wrestled with how to render artistically the "realities" of Asian-Latino intermarriage in all its contradictions and complexities without violating the families' trust and expressed concerns for privacy:

⁶ Alvarez, Maribel. "Dialogic Gestures: Doing Artistic Things with Ethnographic Methods." Essay commissioned by Animating Democracy for *Critical Perspectives*, Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2004. www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/.

...[S]ome of these difficulties the artists faced emerged out of how the process of dialogue had brought them into issues of loyalty and deference for their informants...[T]he families themselves were the ones who raised the question of privacy and intimate, often painful stories. So, the artists attempted to negotiate these tensions as best they could. The families themselves played a role in shaping the intermarriage narrative in as much positive terms as possible. Like Lissa [Jones] says in one of the recorded conversations: they looked for obvious signs of ethnicity and found bland Americanness...

How did issues of privacy and loyalty manifest themselves in final artistic product? As Alvarez summarized some of the critical responses to *Ties That Bind*, the artwork “may have been in the end more ‘generic’ than specific and therefore more middle-of-the-road than the politically charged topic of intermarriage promised.” In other words, while the exhibit was undeniably of high artistic quality, it was less revealing and provocative around difficult issues arising from Asian-Latino intermarriage than viewers might have anticipated. In negotiating the private/public tensions inherent in the project’s dialogic intent, the artists gave greater weight to aesthetic choices that harmonized, rather than sharpened the diversity of experiences in Asian-Latino intermarriages.

While these choices may have diminished the exhibit’s artistic potential according to certain art world standards, from a dialogue standpoint, they clearly advanced “intra-group dialogue” objectives. In her conversations with Jones and Ahn about the project’s artistic process, Lydia Matthews noted in her essay, *Ties that Bind/Ties that Bond: A Community-Based Art Project in Silicon Valley*, that the artists wanted the families “to feel comfortable with their formal choices and even honored by them. They developed the gallery installation recognizing it would serve as a community gathering space for the families during the opening and public dialogue.”⁷ These considerations led the artists to a final artistic product that honored the trust participating families had invested in them by sharing their stories. More importantly, their artistry produced a “safe space” in which the families could come out of the privacy of their homes into a civic sphere in the presence of others.



Detail of “Shadow Boxes” installation by Jennifer Ahn.

Dialogue Outcomes

Taken together, the dialogue sessions were successful in raising general awareness about an issue otherwise buried in the San José community’s social recognition of itself. As Alvarez noted, “The dialogue events extended opportunities for learning, mutual listening, exchanges, validation of personal narratives and social implications beyond the usual range of activities that MACLA would usually schedule around an exhibition.”

⁷ Matthews, Lydia. “Ties that Bind/Ties that Bond: A Community-Based Art Project in Silicon Valley.” Essay commissioned by Animating Democracy for Critical Perspectives, Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2003. www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy.

Intra-group dialogue as part of the continuum of civic dialogue

Yet, for a variety of reasons, MACLA was not able to capitalize on the potential of project's public dialogue dimension. To be sure, as Alvarez points out, the project generated substantial dialogue among the ethnographers, artists and participating families—but much of that discourse remained “interior” to the project, and ultimately did not enter the public sphere. Alvarez explains:

To be fair to MACLA, the participants and the ethnographers themselves steered MACLA away from a more “public” view of the dialogue process—namely because the notion of “intra-dialogue” came up early in the project as soon as we gathered the first group to discuss how to design the research. In this sense, the bulk of discussion in the dialogue sessions that took place revolved around issues of personal memories and personal struggles over identity. Much of the substantial dialogue generated by *Ties* did not take place in “dialogue sessions” but between artists and families, ethnographers and families, artists and ethnographers, and artists and project curatorial staff. The dialogue that took place publicly happened predominantly among intermarriage families speaking to each other and exchanging experiences. Public, larger discussions among non-invested parties . . . did not take place. Even though it was MACLA's idea from the beginning of the project to “implode” the issue of identity in Silicon Valley through large, visible and dynamic “public” conversations, the fate of “dialogue” in *Ties* followed a much more intimate course. Two reasons account for that change: one was the strong “intra-dialogue” discourse and need for privacy expressed by the actual interviewees (something we had not truly anticipated) and the other was that MACLA simply did not have enough resources of people and time to do right by both sets of demands (intimate and public).

In further reflecting on MACLA's struggle to balance the competing demands for intra-group dialogue and public dialogue events, Alvarez pointed to a sense of unease felt by the project team, albeit unarticulated at the time, to place the participating families in “public” dialogue settings. In much the same way that the artists wrestled with how to render artistically the families' personal stories, the project team grappled with how to bring into “public” view the families' personal and intimate dialogue around intermarriage without rendering them as caricatures.

...enabling participating families to voice their private experiences in the presence of others was arguably a public act and as such may well constitute part of the continuum of civic dialogue.

The role of intra-group dialogue among participating families in *Ties that Bind* points to recurring questions about how “civic” is defined in arts-based civic dialogue work. Does civic dialogue necessarily need to occur in “public”? As Alvarez points out, substantial dialogue around the project's civic theme, while not in “public” view, did occur among the participating families,

ethnographers, artists and project team. MACLA's facilitation of intra-group dialogue created a safe space in which Asian-Latino families shared with one another their experiences of intermarriage and personal struggles around identity in the presence of others. *Ties that Bind* suggests that enabling participating families to voice their private experiences in the presence of others was arguably a public act and as such may well constitute part of the continuum of civic dialogue.

Perhaps the most important lesson illuminated by *Ties that Bind* is the intricate and unpredictable nature of dialogue-driven art processes, particularly in those projects in which the civic issue addressed, such as Asian-Latino intermarriage, intersects the private realm of citizens' lives. As Alvarez put it, “If anything, the *Ties* project demonstrates for the objectives of Animating

Democracy that questions of intimacy, civic issues that touch the arena of the “personal” are not easy dialogic enterprises—in spite of the common rhetoric about much of dialogue being about ‘sharing’ one’s feelings.” As *Ties that Bind* revealed, such endeavors require an arts organization to negotiate the terrain between the public and private spheres with sensitivity and integrity, and to reexamine and revise its artistic and dialogic approaches in response to the community’s needs and desires.

Embedding dialogic practice in a community-based arts group in transition

MACLA regarded *Ties that Bind* and its participation in Animating Democracy as a timely opportunity to reflect on its own organizational development. As a small, community-based arts group in the midst of reassessing its programmatic priorities, MACLA sought to re-examine its relationship to the community and the extent to which dialogic practice is (or should be) a dimension of MACLA’s ongoing work.

As Maribel Alvarez put it, *Ties that Bind* stretched MACLA “beyond its comfort zone” in a number of ways. First, the project’s dialogic process presented MACLA with new challenges and complexities that at times overwhelmed its small staff and modest financial resources. Secondly, while MACLA had a ten-year track record in community based arts, it had yet to articulate values and principles underlying those practices and how these values form a guiding vision for the organization. That process of self-reflection and clarification was important for MACLA’s programmers. In the midst of that process, MACLA was also grappling with leadership transition as Alvarez announced her resignation as executive director. Alvarez’s departure presented an obstacle to MACLA in terms of fully embedding dialogic practices within the institution.

To what extent have civic dialogue practices been internalized by MACLA? Recent program activities suggest that dialogue practices are indeed taking root. MACLA’s recent show, “Occupied Space,” addressed questions of social/personal memory and explored the use of auto-ethnography. Anjee Helstrup, MACLA’s curator and associate director is working with artists locally to develop exhibitions over the next couple of years that will utilize the ethnographic-based methodology developed through *Ties that Bind*. In addition, MACLA is in the planning stage of a major arts/community development project that has already activated and tested the commitment to civic dialogue that MACLA developed through Animating Democracy. For Alvarez, MACLA’s “readiness” to embrace civic dialogue positioned it well to learn from its *Ties that Bind* experience. It remains poised to build on this work.

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Lynn E. Stern is a New York-based writer and independent consultant with 15 years’ experience in the nonprofit sector. She advises philanthropic organizations and not-for-profit groups in strategic planning, program design, management and evaluation. Fluent in Russian, Lynn is a specialist in cultural exchange between the U.S., Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. She served as project specialist to the Ford Foundation’s Media, Arts and Culture unit where she oversaw its capacity-building initiatives in the arts, international creative collaboration and arts-based civic dialogue. She currently serves as consultant to the Foundation’s electronic media policy portfolio.