Seeking An American Identity
(Working Inward from the Margins)

SUZANNE LACY

In November 2001, artist, writer, and educator, Suzanne Lacy participated in an Animating Democracy Learning Exchange in Chicago. She joined more than a hundred artists, cultural organization leaders, community partners, and scholars from around the country who are involved in arts-based civic dialogue work, most through the Animating Democracy Lab. In the shadow of September 11th and stimulated by artist Marty Pottenger's exploration of the meaning of U.S. citizenship at the gathering, Lacy considers anew what it means to participate as an artist in civic life. Her essay, "Seeking an American Identity (Working Inward from the Margins)," pursues a host of questions about "civic discourse art" related to identity, representation, transparency, aesthetics, and gauging effect, prompted by the arts-based civic dialogue endeavors of ADI project organizers and artists. Lacy weaves an eloquent exploration of these questions through a fabric of historical context and her own artistic and personal experience, and opens up the issues and possibilities at the intersection of art and civic dialogue for fresh investigation.

INTRODUCTION

I've never liked the red, white, and navy blue colors that come into periodic vogue, more so earlier in my life than now, thankfully. I'm not sure whether my distaste was purely aesthetic (primary colors aren't my cup of tea) or a vague foreshadowing of a future conflicted relationship to my U.S. citizenship.

It's been a long journey: from the swelling of pride in my prepubescent and extremely flat chest as we saluted the flag in elementary school; to civic volunteerism in high school; to the basically patriotic civil rights movement (and later, in my region, the United Farm Workers); to the down-and-out disenfranchisement of the Vietnam era (with still an undercurrent of civic optimism—we could change things); to growing suspicion about the nature of the U.S. government's involvement in Chile and Colombia; to deep cynicism about American business's version of globalism; and finally, 9-11, precipitating the red, white, and blue media event of a decade, a veritable orgy of flag waving.

Growing up white and working class in a small California farm town, but for a slow erosion of belief I, too, could have become the patriot that circumstances of background dictated for most of my schoolmates. Still and yet (a compelling phrase borrowed from an African American friend), I am not in a fixed position with reference to my identity as a United States citizen. I am marginalized by age, class, and gender, but centralized by education, sexual preference, and race.

I have access to institutions denied to many of my friends, yet I remain substantially outside most places of power, even in my own profession. In reference to my country and its place in the world, I alternate between horror and pride, between repulsion and fascination, between the acceptance of tacit privilege and deep shame.

All of which came up for me at the Animating Democracy Learning Exchange in Chicago in November 2001. I came to observe presentations by earnest artists and cultural organization leaders working in partnership with their communities to foster civic dialogue. In the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center and subsequent war on Afghanistan (or War on Terrorism—you choose), I was dismayed at how much I wanted to check out when artist Marty Pottenger introduced a discussion of citizenship. I expected to be a fly on the wall. Instead, I was plunged into a fascinating three-day discussion on belonging, exclusion, language, space, cultural tradition, and the roles of art in public discourse. I left feeling rejuvenated, confused, and stimulated to consider anew what it means to participate as an artist in civic life.

GHOSTS AND THE SPACES THEY INHABIT
(WHOSE PLACE IS THIS?)

> Some of us listen to ghosts; we can't help it. These ghosts have an important story to tell. What does it mean not to be seen? We worked to preserve the space where we found them and to tap into what they were saying.
> —Reverend Deacon Edgar Hopper,
> St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, New York City

A year after slavery was abolished, two slave galleries were constructed for the Negro parishioners of what is now St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In these galleries above the sanctuary, free and indentured African Americans could see, but not be seen. Closed off for decades, discovery of the galleries freed ghosts from former times to engage in contemporary civic dialogue.

Each new immigrant group that arrives in the Lower East Side competes for cultural and political presence—housing, schools, and jobs. History can divide people, justifying claims to resources: I've been here longer than you have. The Slave Galleries and their invisible residents spoke of an historical experience that was particular to African Americans, but Deacon Hopper, minister of the now African American congregation of St. Augustine's, saw both the power of this particular story and the space's relevance to the broader community grappling with ongoing issues of marginalization. He asked, "How do we balance between offering the history of the Slave Galleries as a metaphor that can inspire connections among diverse communities, while maintaining specificities of African American heritage?" Working with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, they invited other communities to consider and talk with each other about how the Slave Galleries might stand as a symbol for their own experiences. So a recent Chinese immigrant sat in the Gallery to listen. A Latina heard whispers blown on hot border wind; an Orthodox Jew attended to the murmured prayers from women hidden behind curtains in the synagogue.

For thirty years, activist artists have testified to specific histories of excluded people, understanding that personal stories are how one enters civic discourse with dignity. Whether those people were Black or poor, women or prison inmates, workers or immigrants, young or old, one of the major strategies of social justice art was to *name* and *give presence* in a society that preferred the silence of well-behaved ghosts. The disappeared experiences of America's marginalized were reclaimed to public life through art, media, and protest. Farm workers stories

were told at dinner tables, prisoners' longings escaped cells via the airwaves, the voices of murdered wives shouted in feminist antiviolence demonstrations.

Sometime in the late eighties, these voices grew in volume and audibly conflicted in a cacophonous American landscape. Discrepancies began to emerge: representation became contested in a territory of multiple identities. An oppressed person in one situation becomes an oppressor in another. Cultural practices were located in an interconnected network of customs that changed their appearance and meaning when transplanted through the drift of immigration. At the Animating Democracy Learning Exchange, Bau Graves, of the Center for Cultural Exchange's *African in Maine* project was conflicted. When the Afghan community uses their theater for cultural events they segregate themselves by gender. The upstairs balcony that accommodates forty people is crammed with sixty or seventy women and children, while thirty men luxuriate below in the space that accommodates two hundred. In the next century, he wondered, will someone look back and remark on the arcane use of their own gallery where women were, like the African Americans of St. Augustine's Church, disappeared?

The vacant sealed galleries of St. Augustine's are empty spaces, and their filling will be an exercise in framing a contemporary metaphor of multiplicity. Artists no longer have the luxury of a single strategy in our art, that of making a singular voice audible and revealing particular ghosts. Formerly we aligned ourselves with these voices based on accidents of our birth, but as we moved into alignment based instead on our values, contradictions appeared. Finding ourselves occasionally on shaky ethical ground (based on our own identities), we are not to be blamed if we look occasionally back to a time when things were simpler and we, too, could claim a singular identity. The Galleries have been unboarded; what it signified at the turn of the last century is vastly different now, over one hundred years later, and a new story is required.

BEARING WITNESS
(WHO OWNS THIS HISTORY?)

> There is a wall between my parents and I when it comes to wanting to identify with the legacy of the Holocaust. My friends don't identify with it, and there is not much interest in getting knowledge.
>
> —Joanna Lindenbaum,
> The Jewish Museum, New York City

Often the Holocaust was not spoken of in families of escaped Jews. It was passed on through silence and inexplicable depressions, as if the house was filled with ghosts. For those of us born in the U.S. after 1945, experience of the Holocaust was for the most part mediated. Whatever U.S. citizens might or might not have known before that date, during the liberation of the camps the first visual representations that arrived in this country were graphic documentary films and photographs.

Firsthand accounts came from the survivors, when they could talk, and from journalists and soldiers. My father, a pilot stationed in England, transported Jews from Africa back to Europe after the war. When he came home to California, I was almost a year old, and his nightmares of the war and its camps may have insinuated themselves into my dreams. Although there were no Jews in town and I do not remember specific conversations about it with my dad, the Holocaust was my memory too, a strong and influential one, but one that perhaps—I can't be sure—

derived only from picture spreads in *Life Magazine* and the movies I attended weekly. Holocaust representation passed into popular culture, memories colluding with fiction.

Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art, an exhibition of the Jewish Museum in New York, plunged its curators, trustees, and staff into intense self-examination. As curator Norman Kleeblatt explained, the Holocaust was a signal event in which Jewish history and mainstream history intersected. For the first 25 years after the war, Holocaust images were abstract. When representational imagery did evolve, it was influenced by the photos taken in the days after the liberation—piles of bodies and emaciated prisoners at fences. While the Museum still receives weekly submissions of this type of artwork, the staff wondered, "Is something else needed at this particular moment?" Their answer was an exhibition of works of art they believed reflected questions of contemporary morality and issues of evil, and their installation strategies and contextual writing would, they hoped, support a complex civic discourse.

The exhibition featured artworks by artists two and three generations removed from the events of WWII, who have eschewed the deeply entrenched Holocaust imagery that focuses on the victim. These artists did not claim to represent survivors' experiences. Instead, employing the challenging language of conceptual art, they used images of perpetrators—Nazis—to provoke viewers to explore the seduction of power as well as contemporary manifestations of evil in the forms of bigotry, war, and genocide.

Mirroring Evil challenged traditional representations of that historical moment—how it operates in Jewish and U.S. cultural memories—but for some survivors it generated a rage around ownership of representation. Standing on the authenticity of lived experience, survivors of the Holocaust are victims, yes, but they are also empowered through the representation of their own stories, their claim to *cultural voice*. Curators anticipated controversy that might arise in challenging traditional perspectives of the Holocaust. It was, of course, not only tradition that was being challenged; the museum became a contest in power, the power to shape meaning through representation. Pitted against each other, it appeared as if a fundamental shift had taken place between generations of Jews, each desiring to explore and find meaning in a common heritage. The exhibition provoked heated ethical debate in the Jewish community, raising provocative questions. Did the museum ignore, in its attempt to raise current questions for a generation virtually untouched by the Holocaust, the nonnegotiable visceral experience of pain for those who endured it? Or is it possible that, as consumers of an overmediated Holocaust, we've become complacent and inured to the predictable accounts of the direct experience, needing ever more provocation? Who has "the right" to speak on the Holocaust, those with direct experience, or those whose experiences were mediated, in this case through popular culture, associative inferences, and, consequently, fantasy?

These questions are not unique to this exhibition, or to art museums in general. They come up wherever power and representation occupy the same forum. While the same questions apply to advertising, commercial entertainment, and news media, however, it is often in the visual arts—somehow seen as more assessable—that people often choose to make their stand. Whether at the Jewish Museum or in Congress deciding on the future of the National Endowment for the Arts, visual art production has become a touchstone for the examination of representation and authority. At the local level in community-engaged art, these issues are incorporated daily in a practiced negotiation between direct experience and representations of it for various ends.

We want to believe in the unassailability of direct experience. (In Oakland, young teen mothers tell me they heed most the words of other teen moms…those who've been there.) A man cannot speak for a woman. A white person for a person of color. Here, even expressions of empathy are suspect. Where once imagination was sufficient passport to the representation of

another's experience, our awareness of the dynamics of power has challenged empathy as sufficient motivation for art making. If an artist works with any experiences other than his or her own, inevitable when one leaves the solitude of the studio and embraces potential social and political functions of art making, how close in experiences must he or she be to her collaborators? Can women make art authentically with other women on women's issues? What if the class positions between artists and community are different? Or the ethnic backgrounds? Can non-Jews comment upon the Holocaust? (To be sure, artists in *Mirroring Evil* were not purporting to do community-based work, but that does not mitigate the essential ethical dilemma. Representations of the Holocaust, it might be argued, continue to be historically contested in ways that directly affect the experience of Jewish people.)

While the essential question of who owns representation of, in particular, painful experiences with political import for specific groups of people is pertinent to all representation, in *Mirroring Evil* it became foregrounded not in the production of the work, but in the museum's decision to present it. Thus it was not the artists per se who were picketed, but the exhibition venue.

With community-based artists, operating as they do closer to the nexus of community experience and critique, this dilemma figures significantly in the actual production of the work. For these artists, strategies grow out of negotiations, each work posing questions that are answered as action and as theory. Many of the forms we have come to assume as part of community-engaged art—its multivocality, for example, its pluralism of styles of presentation and its postscript-like conversations—are aesthetic evolutions developed through confrontation and resolution of conflict during the making. The aesthetic and (simultaneously) political negotiation of differences in experience and the ways experience is represented, more volatile when focused on inequity and pain, produces evolving, rough-edged, and imperfect art forms that are particularly adept at modeling civic discourse.

From this central conflict in community-engaged art—origination of experience and communication of it by another, no matter how sympathetic or aligned in features of identity—a long history of shape making has evolved. There is another approach, one that reconfigures the central voice in the work as that of the perpetrator, rather than aligning with those on whom injustice was perpetrated. The creator of the film, *Traces of the Trade*, is descended from one of New England's largest slave trading families. It was the North's maritime economy that fueled the slave trade through its profitable engagement in the industrial revolution launched by Southern cotton. Filmmaker Katrina Browne, whose ancestors are from Rhode Island, set out to explore the legacy of slavery on white people—the denial, shame, and guilt—on a literal family voyage from Rhode Island to Ghana to Cuba, tracing the Triangle Trade Route and interviewing white family members and the descendents of African, Cuban, and African American people impacted by her family business. The finished film aims to address the denial, defensiveness, and shame among whites that pose barriers to engaging in dialogue about race.

In *Traces of the Trade*, the filmmaker positioned her voice centrally in the work, looking square in the face of her ethnic and familial privilege and listening to those upon whose backs it was earned. In postmodernist reflexivity but with modernist moral engagement she adopted one of the few positions left to white folks in the terrain of race and ethnicity. The filmmaker understood a moral obligation to attend to the pain that participants would inevitably experience as a result of their filming. Family members who were interviewed, people they interviewed in Africa and Cuba, even the filmmakers themselves—all were deeply impacted by the project. Filmmakers wondered how much of this pain should be professionally monitored and how to deal with their own pain as makers? Of particular interest here, they wondered how much to reveal of this process, including the questioning, in their finished product? The provocation of

aroused pain translated into the aesthetic and moral searching that is characteristic of engaged community work, often finding its way into the art as a transparent process.

One way or another, the identity of maker and the identity of community, the constituency, the subject, or the collaborators (however these are framed) is central to this work, and on this template of process we play out all the social injustices and misrepresentations that constitute our history and our present civic life. Perhaps laughable because of how little power artists actually command in this culture, nevertheless these inventions become prototypical laboratories for the enactment of public life. In this public realm, who speaks for whom? Should an artist work with a constituency base not their own by virtue of an assortment of identity characteristics? When these characteristics overlap in some ways, who determines the priorities that justify an artist's engagement? Though in some cases artists evolve from and continue to work in a specific location with only their exact equivalences, even there differences in age and gender eventually result. More often the artist's identity is in fact different—whether through age, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, geographic location, or class.

Irrespective of the perceived 'correctness' of the artwork, when reduced to its essence, community-engaged art is most often a process of collectively making meaning via subjectivity that is translated into an aesthetic frame made most often by someone who does not have the exact same experience. The discussion on *insider* and *outsider* is of necessity a conversation on risk, privilege, and resources that is echoed in all civic discourse. A subtle and often unconscious undercurrent makes discussion painful and evasive in the arts, as if one day someone shared the secret—to be an insider was the only moral way to work as an artist in a field of difference, given the dangers of misrepresentation—and from that day forward we found ourselves justifying our positions as *insider* of one or more marginalized groups—more black than white, more female than male, more poor than rich—or claiming a validity based on association.

The question of one's membership comes up depending on the potency of cultural signifiers, with particular pain around race and class. In 2003 in the United States, would we expect anything else? While none of us experience all forms of oppression, or even recognize them, to some degree most of the artists at the ADI convening had some working knowledge of what it felt like to be excluded. We all agreed that it is political dynamite for white artists to appropriate the stories of people of color. What we did not agree upon was what constituted appropriation. Labeling oppression is best done by the oppressed, but who is entitled to speak for the entire group where there are countless differences of perspective within any given group? If, as with *Traces of the Trade*, makers critically align themselves with white oppression, do they run the risk of recentralizing the discourse to white, albeit contrite white, experience? If we do cross borders, work with experiences not our own, where do we locate *voice* and *agency* in our art?

In 1978, the actress Kathleen Chang and I created a performance piece on a boat in the San Francisco Bay and on a hill on top of Angel Island, the major port for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Asian immigrants to the West Coast. We were two characters from the turn of the last century: her husband's grandmother, Leung Ken-sun who ran away from her home in China, and Donaldina Cameron, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary who rescued Chinese children smuggled into San Francisco for sexual slavery. As we searched for our respective voices within the work, we ran into the very questions that would impede us today, perplexing questions of cultural appropriation, colonization, and assimilation. Struggling for an authentic approach to our collaboration, we chose strategies of representing ourselves according to our race, representing different perspectives on history in discrete narratives, and ending with a present-time discussion that deconstructed the ethical and political issues that had arisen for us during the making of the performance. While I liked the transparency of the work and its layering, the performance has

always seemed somewhat unresolved, with disjointed narratives on gender, race, nationality, and friendship, as incomplete, fraught, and vulnerable as are today's civic discourses.

Two decades later, at the Animating Democracy Learning Exchange, the notion of transparency was not just seen as good civic value, but fundamental to the practice. Many felt that transparency held a key to both ethics and aesthetics of this troublesome practice, a transparency that was not only about locating one's own voice honestly within the work, but also about the art process itself, how information is edited, shaped, and presented. How much of the soup of experience—of the artists, collaborators, and community members—roused in making should be revealed in the art, and how much is indulgence? Could our own emotions, like beacons, lead us as makers to the heart of the work? As one of the filmmakers of *Traces of the Trade* suggested, "You don't edit out the messy stuff."

The changeful nature of this work is its strength and its difficulty. All assumptions within a transparent process are open to challenge: dominant cultural assumptions about what makes a good story—choice of subject, narrator's voice, the style, shape, and choice of medium; the availability of economic resources, ownership of venues, and choice of audience; the methods of entering a community, researching, enlisting support, and consensus building. Perhaps most important, even the aesthetic expression is open to negotiation. This scrutiny that actually gives birth to form suggests that *process* is interesting in terms of both structure and content of the art. *Discourse* thus becomes an important brushstroke in the representation of process. Today's work must reflect the questioning that took place during the production, these questions often sharing the same cacophony, contradiction, hybridity, confusion, and fusion evident in today's public life.

This messiness might appear to be a threat to effective civic dialogue; despite the discipline required in making, art revels in the accidental, the unexpected, and the innovative. Artists seek an unpredictable kind of knowing, safer perhaps when the exploration is confined to the studio. In the civic realm, with high stakes issues and unpredictable occurrences, artists' interest in new shapes and forms can be (and often is) seen as dangerous. This tension between the need to control, providing safe spaces for our audience to approach difficult subjects, and the tolerance for the ambiguous and unexpected must be recognized as we craft and name civically engaged art.

THE ETHICS OF STORYTELLING
(WHAT SHOULD NOT BE TOLD?)

> When you have to sit in that audience and realize that you are the people in those photos watching that horrible lynching, how do the facilitators help white people to face this?
>
> —Margery King,
> Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh

The Andy Warhol Museum decided to exhibit *Without Sanctuary*, an exhibition of 100 photos of lynchings of mostly African American men from the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century. Pittsburgh, home to the museum whose mission is to be a vital center for the community, is also home to nationally visible race problems. Within recent memory of the Chicago gathering, two racially motivated killing sprees, one by a black man and one by a white man, demonstrated the tensions that periodically strike this city. What were you afraid of? We

asked the Warhol Museum's curator, educator, and community advisor at the ADI Learning Exchange. They replied, "What will be the effect of the photos? What if no one comes? Where was the art? What if there is violence in the galleries? Will we be accused of robbing African American legacies? Are there things that should not be seen?"

The museum with its mostly white staff couldn't present this exhibition alone; now, perhaps for the first time, they *really* needed the community. When the director of the Center for Race Relations of the YWCA presented the information about the proposed exhibition to staff member Sherry Cottom she reacted viscerally: "Who in the hell do they think they are, a white museum showing the history of lynching? I went down to the museum with a whole bunch of my own people…I was their worst enemy." Mutually wary at first, the museum and members of the community embarked upon a planning process.

There were bumps in the road. Early on during a Pittsburgh conference, a white woman spoke on the history of lynching to a mostly white audience. As Sherry reported, the speaker's presentation had all the quality of "describing a vacation trip to the Bahamas." In response, an African American historian took a more personal and emotional approach, remembering how, on his first job as one of few blacks in the Center City business district, a white gay man verbally attacked him. The museum staffers, among them several gay white men, were in their turn incensed. Jessica Arcand, education curator for the Warhol, discussed her own learning. "I had been dealing with issues around race programmatically and theoretically, a framework of safety that prevented me from really examining the issues. We had differences to negotiate. How can we deal with such emotional issues safely, but rigorously, within institutions?"

Members of the Pittsburgh black community emphasized the importance of showing these historical photographs in the context of the struggle and achievements of African Americans. Showing community assets rather than focusing on victimization has long been a strategy of activist artists. One of the most important additions to community-based art was a rethinking of the audience on both ethical and aesthetic grounds, integrating a new relationship into both choice of venue and shape of the artwork. Nowhere is this more urgently necessary than when trauma is the subject of the work. In *Three Weeks in May* (1977), I took on the still largely unexplored topic of rape in Los Angeles. Rape reports from police blotters were recorded on a large public map of the city. Next to it, a second map revealed the location of activities and institutions of resistance, including three weeks of art performances, media events, and activist interventions throughout the city. The exhibition format at the Warhol was a page out of the text of this and other earlier art projects: elicit community participation from the beginning; form partnerships with churches, clubs, and other relevant organizations and institutions; provide facilitated dialogues for a broad public audience, co-led by community members; contextualize images of oppression with historical displays and art of resistance; engage local media; and develop avenues for audience response—at the Warhol a video comment booth, daily discussions facilitated by museum staff and community members, special events, and personalized postcards mailed at a later date by the museum.

It is reasonable to argue that the seventies feminist art movement and its focus on physical violence provided a significant historical contribution to artists' need to take audience reactions into account while making their work, thus influencing its shape. Women's deeply personal and experiential understanding of trauma through sexual violence resulted in a necessary evolution toward audience-centeredness. This was not simply about creating a context for art but rather an example of necessity prompting an evolution in form language. While the content of text and image in activist art manifests its pedagogy, less understood is how the artwork's structure produces learning in experiential and transformative ways.

Take, for example, a video installation in 1979 by the artist Nancy Angelo as part of a larger public art project at the Los Angeles Woman's Building. *The Incest Awareness Project* (1979, Labowitz, Lowe, et al.) was, like the exhibition at the Warhol, an artful civic discourse on an obscured social experience through performances, installations, exhibitions, mass media reports, speak-outs, and interdisciplinary symposia.[i] In Angelo's installation, the audience sat on one of approximately 15 chairs arranged on a pink circle painted on the floor. On five of these chairs video monitors were installed, screens at head height. As the event began, faces appeared on the monitors and talked to each other, via carefully orchestrated nondigital technology. It was an electronic consciousness-raising group talking intimately, emotionally, and with a sense of primary revelation. Quickly, audience members in the circle of chairs found themselves included in this intense discussion, more impactful because such information was not yet in the public realm. At the end of the media-relayed but scarcely mediated group discussion, the audience sat in stunned silence. Because she knew (based on emerging statistics) that many audience members probably had experienced incest, Angelo created a second component to her installation: a facilitated postperformance discussion led by a social worker trained in incest counseling. The discussion itself was part of the performance, rather than its interpretation, an innovative and populist audience-based practice inserted into both a minimalist art discourse and a virtually non-existent civic dialogue on violence against women.

At the Warhol Museum the stakes were high. Should they exhibit photos of lynching with their graphic violence and open display of racial hatred? If they did not, would they be hiding an important historical experience that still disfigures contemporary civic life? Would they risk evoking intense and present pain among African Americans, and whites, for that matter? I steeled myself in advance to be able to look at a total of five photos, one on each wall, before I literally ran out of the gallery, transported by an awful and murderous rage. Is it possible the photos might provide prurient entertainment for some white folks? Or simply inure the audience further to the daily present humiliation of being black in America? Or would this exhibition provide an important historical context, otherwise not viscerally available, to a present-day community interested in overcoming racism?

One of the lessons from the seventies, exercised with great care by the Warhol staff and community committee, was to frame the violence from the experience of the violated, rather than those who can view from the safe distance of nonexperience. This lesson can assist us as we frame civic discourse as a practice within the arts.

HUNTING THE WHALE
(IS CIVIC DISCOURSE ART?)

> In the Inupiat culture, the whaling tradition is not just about hunting to eat, but subsistence on all levels. Every part of the whale is used. Bone become homes, fat becomes fuel, skins become boats. Whaling is a ritual of life for us.
>
> —Jeff Hermann,
> Perseverance Theatre

Barrow, Alaska is a small town of 5,000 people accessible only by plane, boat, dogsled and snow machine. When Perseverance Theatre decided to present *Moby Dick,* it was not so interested in translating Melville. Rather, the theater group wondered what it *means* to tell that story in Alaska. They began with interviews of whaling captains in Barrow and an exploration of the

Inupiat people's whaling traditions. Perhaps unexpectedly the work took on a political cast, revealing fundamentally different cultural approaches to hunting. In the city, white people don't want the natives to have a legal advantage; to them hunting is a sport. To the Inupiat, hunting is a means of survival, a ritual, and a way of life.

Perseverance Theatre's exchange with the whalers of Barrow exposed differences between the white and Native approaches to art as well as hunting, including the link between Inupiat art and its communal and spiritual life. Said Mike Travis, a native Alaskan attending the Learning Exchange (connected not to Perseverance's project but another), "We show who we are by our objects. We dance with our objects to show our connection with the spiritual world." At the ADI Learning Exchange, Kewulay Kamara, an artist from Africa observed that in the U.S. "you always have to market your work in some way, so you have to make a case for its existence," pointing out the divorce of art practice from its integrated functionality in our lives.

The Animating Democracy Initiative, founded as it was to enhance the practices of a relatively obscure area of art, is in part an exercise in naming. This is not as simple as it might first appear, because this art sits at the intersection of creative practice, relationship, and civic life. On one hand, pairing art with civic process is a simple matter. According to ADI national advisor and former dialogue specialist with the National Conference for Community and Justice, Wayne Winborne, "We are talking about consciously catalyzing the political issues of the day. Art allows us to get at things that people can't get at on their own." There is art, and there is dialogue, and they join hands in a venture to operationalize art in the service of a public agenda.

While such art does in fact engage local communities and often speaks to them (or allows them to speak) across differences in culture and class, it doesn't always play well in the higher regions of American cultural life. Not everyone sees it as art. Even in the one visual arts area that routinely incorporates dialogic practice—museum education—there is a tendency to separate the art from the discursive process. In commenting upon the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, the curator stressed that art comes first, suggesting that dialogue was an *enhancement* to the visual art. Acknowledging multipositionality among the collaborators, "What makes it work is a total integration where each one of us wants to do this project for our own reasons." Museum staff nevertheless stressed their position: the exhibition, while it addressed race and racism, was *not* an antiracism workshop. The dialogue framed in the museum had to be about the images, and while audiences were to be met "where they were at," the role of the presenters, staff, and community partners was to guide attendees to focus on the exhibition.

When we consider the totality of our public projects *as art*, including intention at the opening edge and impact on the closing, with all the process in between, one question repeatedly arises: does the art match the formal sophistication of other contemporary art in its genre as seen in museums and theaters, or does it have a demonstrable and measurable effect in public life? Good art versus good serviceable cultural development: this dual encumbrance creates evaluative criteria that appear to randomly migrate in various critical texts, from a discussion of its *appearance* (usually in the context of art derived from quite different ideas) to *function* (in a public context where art is seen by many as having no function). While in some instances we can talk about the results of the artwork in concrete terms, e.g., the artwork stopped a gentrification process, created a police training program for youth sensitivity, left an anthology of oral histories in the care of local residents, or changed the lives of some homeless people, such evidence is mostly anecdotal. Even if we could measure social worth, what would that tell us about aesthetics under the terms of the current critical discourse?

Held as they are (at least on the civic side) to the demands of demonstrating worth within a confused notion of the value of art in general, civically engaged artists often feel they need to leave something (hopefully of aesthetic value) for people with whom they have worked. I suspect this notion may have developed to counter the critique raised during the nineties, on itinerant public artists. In flailing around to respond to funders or to their own notions of ethics and impact, artists can become programmatic and predictable, bound to deliver objects of some sort. And so civic-minded artists leave murals, videotapes, anthologies of oral histories, even ongoing programs within communities, causing us to wonder whether the art is that which is left behind, or whether what is left behind is instead evidence that art did occur here?

Even artists (including those benefiting from ADI's grants) are not convinced civic discourse art is an art form in and of itself, complaining of a continuing need to morph language and the look of what one does in order to attract funding. (Outside this funded circle the critique is even more intense). Said one attendee, "Civic dialogue seems to describe something we were doing already, and it feels like the art is being trivialized. Why can't art just be funded to be great art instead of having to be disguised to get funding?" Wayne Winborne expressed amusement at artists (like me) who spend time on definitions and distinctions. In one intense discussion questioning whether civic dialogue art must embrace multiple viewpoints, Winborne responded, "It's fascinating that artists experience this angst. If you make good art, it will stimulate dialogue. A good facilitator will get it there. You don't have to worry about whether you should represent all voices in the art…the dialogue folks can handle that stuff." United by common cause, we are nevertheless faced with radically different concepts: Is civic dialogue art an explanatory text for art, a more or less inventive art education program? Is it an aesthetic slant on other cultural projects: e.g., revising history, building tourism, engaging gentrification, increasing public discourse? Or is civic dialogue art an evolution in form and practice of community art?

While ADI might advertise its goal as an invigorated public life, it poses a provocative question about the form, not just the function, of art. Although some of its sponsored projects might aspire to be art that is surrounded, enhanced by, or used in the service of civic discourse, others will, no doubt, aspire to creating new forms of *dialogic art*. Rather than retreating from questions that challenge prevailing notions of aesthetic form or artistic practice, we can take them as challenges of redefinition. In my revisionist history, I would suggest that at least since the early 1900s we could locate this exploration on form and function in the civic realm within many international avant-garde arts practices. In a sense one might see this as a quest to reconnect art to meaning in civic life. As former connections to materiality have decayed in contemporary arts practices, we might look to more ephemeral and publicly located processes as a new "materiality."

Is hunting the whale, finding the art in this practice, a futile exercise?   Is distinguishing between civic art and civic activism really necessary? Could we just say that we are all working toward similar goals and leave it at that? I argue it is of critical importance to the arts to locate these art practices within the trajectory of art history, to give real texture and meaning to the notion of artist citizenship and in so doing accomplish the reconstruction of the civic relevance of art. Whatever we call it (and each new naming functions to further discourse), this art is fundamentally a process of research and exploration. In an important way, such art is not about language per se, but about the space language takes place in, about speakers and their relationship to each other, and about the direction, intention, and effects of the conversation. It is about values and listening and inclusion. To be sure, political realities as well as the pragmatic nature of American character demand certain concrete deliverables in civic action. Within this paradigm, the role of art in getting people to talk with each other, and perhaps as a result to think or act differently, is just about the only certain role for civic artists. On this we can deliver.

FINDING OUR WAY TO THE FLAG
(IS ART A CITIZENSHIP PRACTICE?)

> If you don't have a strong stomach for this work (and some muscle), get out of it.
> —Neill Archer Roan

The ADI Learning Exchange took place mid-November 2001, a scant two months after the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center, an event that quickly became a referendum on government policies, race, and citizenship. Artist Marty Pottenger created an artwork asking participants to consider our feelings about the United States. Intense emotional responses erupted, including dire pronouncements from some that since 9-11 the world had "forever changed" and from others, like an African-born Kewulay Kamara: "What has changed about the world…5,000 people died in one shot? Is that something new?"

Throughout the daylong discussions on citizenship, I was discomforted, particularly when holding, gingerly and at arm's length, a miniature flag distributed to each participant. Pottenger encouraged us to express through it our sentiments on citizenship. Immediately I recalled Jimmi Hendrix's unmercifully distorted rendition of the National Anthem. I remembered students marching with Chavez in the grape fields and burning down the Bank of America in Santa Barbara. Product of the sixties, I tore the tiny flag into strips then reunited them as braids, a gratuitous and facile act in the face of my own history.

It is interesting for someone from my activist generation to consider the seemingly vast ennui in U.S. public life today. The transience and urgency of lifestyles, the sense of not enough time and constant movement creates a lack of grounding in geographic and emotional terms. A deep sense of futility seems to pervade. Overwhelmed from the scale of institutions, the reach of communication, and the scope and intransigence of the problems to be solved provokes even greater investment in the very personal feelings of impotency in the public realm. The promise of seventies' activist artists was cultural change, a transformation that in significant ways has not occurred. For those of us who have worked in community for twenty or thirty years, [we've] likely taken civic institutions in various forms as venues, as materiality, or as content for our work. In the evolution of community-responsive art, institutional intractability is a factor to be reckoned with on both social and artistic levels.

It is undeniable that personal transformation does take place during the making and exhibiting of public art projects. Testimonies over time attest to the impact on individual lives. This is not unexpected; engaged art is precisely about the experiencing participant. However, hopes for lasting and large-scale social change through individual awareness and working on art projects are perhaps naïve in today's terms. The artist seeking to participate in social justice movements ultimately faces questions not unlike those confronting urban planners, educators, and politicians. Artists working in ambitious scale within communities encounter institutions as a potential *site for change* and institutional *resistance to change*. The institutional trajectory is to maintain itself and to change only if necessary, and slowly. While institutions can be affected by transient energy of art projects, the question is how profound and lasting will such influence be? Once the art project is over, what is its legacy within the various institutions that carry our vision and values? Can change be embedded in ongoing ways that retain the radical nature of the originating artwork?

We are not without road maps here. The longer an artist works within an institutional territory, the more effective he or she becomes within it, the greater the chances for institutional change.

Artists and journalists in the prison reform movement, for example, were able in limited ways to develop programs, influence the lives of some prisoners, and bring public awareness to inequities in incarceration rates. But during the three decades of this activity, the number of prisons grew exponentially and our partners in communities raised the bar, setting a higher standard for our efforts. Artists who tackled political issues, from violence against women to public school education, hoped for more: to impact public policies, voting tendencies, social values, distribution of funding, and the general enhancement of equity.

Not to discount the impact of art on individuals, for purposes of discussion I am challenging artists who work with public themes and processes to explore with me a rigorous standard of social (not individual) change. In my own work with youth in Oakland, over several years I managed to gain enough credibility both within public school, health, and police institutions to navigate freely, command resources, and create a series of performances and installations with rather fulsome civic cooperation. Many, many youth participated over the ten years of this work, and several continued working with the loose-knit team of artists that became an ongoing community: We went to high school graduations, taught video skills, found internships and jobs, visited detention centers, testified in court, wrote letters of recommendation and helped with college applications. But after ten years of highly public programming, several large performances, scores of televised reports and documentaries, over 1,000 youth in art and video workshops, and models for police training programs and interventions between teachers and students, the institutions that would continue to affect the lives of Oakland youth remained *substantially and programmatically* unchanged. Though it is difficult to calculate the shift in public attitude created by long-term artistic work in a community, it is safe to say that such work contributes over time in incremental and collective ways to the public perception. But if the goal of social change through art is to change the conditions of people's lives, that change will take place perhaps in large part by embedding it within the institutions that create and maintain public policies.

On the last morning of the conference, Rich Harwood, founder and president of The Harwood Institute, was invited to present a workshop on civic processes and strategies of engagement. As often happens within the public and uncontrollable territories of our discourses, the intentions of planners were subverted by real life. We went on one final merry-go-round that left some participants exhausted and dismayed. It left me quite energized. The problems that came up in the discussion—on race, gender, authority, centrism, language, expectations, and power—were those I face daily in the production of my own work. Rha Goddess, artist and dialogue facilitator, objected to some of Harwood's use of language. Acknowledging her objectives, he asked if the audience could set the discussion about language aside in the interests of covering the material he had been invited to present.

Many could not. As emotions and opinions bounced around the room, I saw through the eyes of first one then the other speaker, moving from position to position. Perhaps the biggest barrier to a full and democratic participation in civic life is fear, our insecurities growing along with our understanding of the scale of global inequities. As the weekend at ADI Learning Lab progressed, the notion of safe space, which in the beginning we perhaps unwittingly assumed—after all we were in the company of kindred spirits—slowly eroded. In the end we found ourselves like an old married couple, in the middle of a distressingly familiar argument.

As with civic discourse itself, art that attempts to provide an arena for multiple perspectives can be extremely painful, particularly as it approaches real life. I watched the ADI Learning Exchange become a compelling example of real time civic discourse. Intelligent and well-intentioned people revealed themselves to each other in unrehearsed and often difficult ways. I saw beached whales,

exposed skin, and bare white bones scaffolding new ideas. I saw inchoate and nonfixed form emerging, questions without answers that cover the page like a sketch with wide-open spaces. Somehow it felt like raw citizenship was being enacted, the compelling aesthetic shape of civic discourse:

> "If we get hung up on straightening out language, we will be here all day and not get to the presentation on public engagement."

> "What doesn't work for me is that *public* is often in handcuffs on the seven o clock news. Some of these same words have delivered horrific news to us."

> "The terms of the debate have been shaped by someone who is not most of *us*, someone who is white and male and wealthy, for example. In order to have civic discourse how much do we have to agree to let certain things 'ride'?"

> "I checked out when we began to talk about language. I don't even know if dialogue is possible, if every word that comes out of my mouth is tainted, if I am so concerned about my ability to talk that I can't have dialogue."

The producers of the Animating Democracy Initiative have long been committed to an authentic interrogation of effective practice. "By our own definitions, I don't think we aspired to staging a civic dialogue at this Learning Exchange," said Barbara Schaffer Bacon. "The only explicit civic issue addressed was citizenship. We have a lot of mixed feelings about which elements of the weekend achieved civic dialogue." Self-critical and curious about form, they concluded that several elements made this weekend not *public dialogue*: intention wasn't there in the beginning, ground rules (such as instructions in careful listening and equity among participants) weren't established, issues to be discussed were not clearly articulated, and too many topics were considered simultaneously. Not to discount the need to instill rigor in this practice, for me the experience was *in fact* a civic dialogue, in form as well as content, the same volatile subjects simmering just under the skin of public life. The issues of this discourse may not have been presented clearly in the beginning, but in reflecting upon the whole weekend they were everywhere evident, the messy stuff of our civic life. As someone from the conference said, "We have no idea of the effects of what we set in motion."

Perhaps I saw it this way because I was not the producer of this learning lab. If it was my own artwork (and I've been there many times) I might have been more consumed with doubt. As I watched the unfolding, from my vantage point as respondent, I saw an aesthetic of civic process I have seen many times before, most memorable in recent experience during the performance of *Code 33: Emergency Clear the Air* (Lacy, Julio Morales, and Unique Holland, 1999). As 150 Oakland teenagers and 100 police officers settled in small groups on the roof of a downtown parking garage between the head lights of parked red, white, and black cars, 2,000 audience members lined up outside. Across the street, a small, hundred-strong group of mostly college-aged protesters arrived intent on gaining access to television cameras gathering for the extensively publicized performance. They came to bring attention to the case of Mumia Abu Jamal, convicted of the murder of a policeman in Philadelphia and sentenced to death. As we watched the protestors trying to interrupt the conversations between young people and police, Code 33's multicultural and leftist team of artist-directors were bemused: on the same end of the political spectrum, many of us active in antiprison work, we initiated an invitation to the protestors to have a platform within the performance, but were refused. Over two years in the making, the performance lumbered forward, with its spectacle of 30 television monitors with youth-made videos, intense youth and police conversations, heated discussion between 80 neighborhood residents representing the community perspectives, 50 youth dancers, mentorship sign-up tables,

police cars, low riders' cars,] and a helicopter. But it certainly was not stage-perfect show in timing and choreography, with behind-the-scenes interruptions from protestors that made it feel more like trouble-shooting a demonstration than directing a performance.

The ADI Learning Exchange had strong resemblance to a public artwork on a controversial topic in an exposed public space. If one seeks perfect and controlled solutions, many conundrums— the scale of the social problems we face made larger through our awareness of global forces, the inevitability of having to examine one's own participation in oppression, the seeming impossibility of maneuvering across differences, and the paradoxical need to make art that is beautiful, coherent, disciplined, and meaningful—will lead to paralysis. The activist-artist strategy of optimistic movement forward in the face of pessimism, contradiction, and imperfection keeps us honest. If we are willing to drop our defenses and listen, we will learn how we each, unwitting or not, bear the burden of our identity. It's a burden worth taking up. The shift from an identity-fixed citizenship by virtue of one's birth to a global one with allegiances to humanity rather than countries is not a facile personal choice but a process that begins in proximity and often-difficult conversation.

While I remain cynical about the United States government, I did come away from the ADI convening, not with patriotic spirit filling my (still flat) chest, but with something very akin to love swelling there. Is patriotism finally, in the words of Harwood, a devotion to something you love? Participants were divided in their perceptions of what was happening that last morning, but even when they left the room in varying modes of despair or anger, they returned once again to the debate. As Jessica Arcand from the Warhol museum said, "I am still reeling from the issue of civic and personal, and the importance of acknowledging the personal…to me the first time we began to get to dialogue was this morning when things got unsafe."

I left Chicago wondering if, bolstered by projects such as the Animating Democracy Initiative, art in the U.S. is heading toward *full civic engagement*. Certainly the trajectory of this work over thirty years, with its challenges to governmental and corporate motivations; its presentation of the larger historical frame of power relations; its deep commitment to the enfranchisement of all; its naïve belief in the ability of the public agenda to right itself with enough information; its practice of bringing the voiceless into the public sphere with dignity, through their stories; its increasingly adept strategies of dissent, community organizing, and political critique; its ethical questions; its hybridity of thought, media, and approaches—is one that mimics a trajectory of civic life.

Seeking centers from the margins, artists are defining a Bill of Rights for cultural citizenship consisting of dignity, respect, history, sufficiency, identity, and freedom from visual and cultural assault. I left in love with the people in that room, intelligent, committed, talented people, willing to stick out the dialogue the lack of which has dismantled much of our public life. I left with my heart holding their desire to be fair-minded and just in the face of their own needs, their ability to listen and to hold their position on the most difficult topics facing us today, far deeper than terrorist threat. I left with images of their willingness to stick out the process, to continue to exert their own shape on our collective interaction, to stay.

Like the Inupiat, artists dance with art through our embrace of processes, even civic ones. For an artist, art is commitment. For a certain kind of artist, like those in ADI projects, that commitment is linked inextricably to social justice and public good, and gives us a fortitude that delivers us through the pains and doubts of public life. For these artists, their art is rarely completely controllable, often unpredictable. But when it works, it is beautiful. It feels important. One struggles with finding and holding its shape within a messy "life" process. Something real has taken place, and it is not always safe, not always understandable in its entirety. It's an imperfect

art, this working in public, and its aesthetic hallmarks, when we learn to see them clearly, will be based on vulnerability and transparency and complexity. We will, in Harwood's words, "be emotional, we will cry, walk out. That is what democracy is all about." I don't know about democracy, but I do know about the passion to make something, and how that passion stands strong in the face of all kinds of pain in order to give shape. If that urge to make finds its way into public life, so much the better.

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Suzanne Lacy is an artist, writer, and educator of international reputation, whose work includes large scale performances on urban themes. She is a theorist of public art and a pioneer in community development through art. Lacy's best known work to date is "The Crystal Quilt", created for the IDS Building, a Phillip Johnson-designed landmark in Minneapolis, with 430 older women performers. The project was aired live on PBS. Her work "Full Circle", honoring women's accomplishments, featured 100 boulder/monuments which were placed overnight on the streets of Chicago's Loop. This three month public event was nationally covered by The Associated Press and The Wall Street Journal. In Oakland, California, her work with inner-city teenagers has been documented by CNN and in a one hour documentary by NBC. Lacy has exhibited at Museums of Contemporary Art in London, San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles, among others, and has published over 60 articles and a book, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,* that serves as a seminal textbook on public art. She has been reviewed in major magazines, books, and newspapers, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *Art in America.* She is the recipient of fellowships from The Guggenheim Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, Lila Wallace Reader's Digest, and Arts International and has consulted for The Ford Foundation.

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i On the West Coast, Labowitz and I developed this pedagogic model, one theorized from an amalgam of feminist politics, media theory, community organizing strategies, and the populist applications of lifelike art ideas of our teachers, Joseph Beuys and Allan Kaprow. A host of artists contributed to this shaping of theory and practice, including Sheila de Bretteville, Judy Baca, Arlene Raven, Cheri Gaulke, and Jerri Allyn, to name a very few. It is likely that at the same time other visual and theater artists were inventing similar forms.