



**Animating Democracy:
Basics and Best Practices
of Arts & Civic Engagement**

Selected notes from a session offered at Americans for the Arts' 2007 convention *Risk & Reward* in Las Vegas, Nevada. Presented by Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza, Co-directors, Animating Democracy

ART creates indelible images
ART expresses difficult ideas through metaphor and movement
ART communicates at the highest levels of language and beyond the limits of language
ART is a powerful force for illuminating civic experience

1. Intent of the session:

What we hope to do today is share:

- ❖ Context for why *civic engagement* seems so prevalent as a topic right now
- ❖ Key concepts of arts-based civic engagement
- ❖ Principles and best practices through some projects we've come to know
- ❖ And... to get you thinking about opportunities in your communities

2. What is arts-based civic engagement?

How can artists and arts organizations – the cultural assets in your community – create opportunities for civic engagement – encouraging people to check back in to civic life?

EXERCISE: Think of a time when an experience of art – of making it, seeing it, hearing it, reading it - helped you connect to or understand an issue, made you want to talk with others, and/or made you want to do something about it? Turn to your neighbor. Each of you take a minute to share that story.

Share as a full group: Types of engagement

- ❖ In the moment/incidental: in the lobby, over coffee, over the neighborhood fence
- ❖ Design & planning: advisory groups, focus groups, public forums, partner meetings

- ❖ Research: interviews, story circles, oral history collection, process drama
- ❖ Creative process: engagement with the artist in making the work or participating in the work
- ❖ In relation to the artistic work: facilitated dialogue, internet dialogue, blogs

Civic engagement can be:

- ❖ Incidental vs. intentional
- ❖ Integral to the art or artistic process vs. augmenting the art or artistic process

Examples from Animating Democracy (video clips)

Animating Democracy has been a learning laboratory for work at the intersection of art and civic engagement. Animating Democracy set out to nurture artistic work that was:

- ❖ intentional in its civic goals
- ❖ deliberate in planning civic *dialogue* activity
- ❖ conscious of the role that the arts could play in generating civic engagement
- ❖ equally interested in how civic intent might offer fertile ground for artists and artistic investigation

Animating Democracy projects made a notable difference. They broke down barriers to participation by offering inclusive invitations, compelling formats, multi-voiced reflections of various publics, and safe spaces for dialogue.

3. What is the unique capacity of art?

Animating Democracy - by dictionary definitions, means "giving spirit" to "government by the people." Government by the people assumes an **informed** citizenry, **participating** actively in the policy choices that affect their lives.

The arts tell stories that can "inform" the public. Art uses the power of truth and beauty. Art can suspend judgment, tolerate ambiguity, present multiple voices and truths, and imagine new realities. It can offer new ways of looking at issues that can shift contentious public debate and move people to deeper understanding.

The arts invite participation. They can *offer a welcoming entry point* to civic participation; *bring forward voices* often silenced or left out of public discourse; *create open and receptive spaces* for expressing and hearing alternative views; and *provide alternative forms of dialogue* through dance, poetry, theater, and other forms.

4. Why focus on civic engagement now?

Is it the new buzzword, frame, lens, a better rationale for our importance? Or is it a smart choice to work actively to realize the *potential* of the arts and of our cultural institutions to make a civic contribution?

The concern about civic engagement comes from more than just a few arts funders. Growing interest and investment in civic engagement is being encouraged by:

- ❖ National parks
- ❖ College campuses
- ❖ A movement to re-establish civics programs in K-12 school curricula
- ❖ The Case, Gates and EBay Foundations
- ❖ An affinity group, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), recently established in connection to the Council on Foundations
- ❖ An NEA study asserting that statistically, arts participants tend to be more civically engaged. But arts participation can be an important form of and platform for civic engagement in and of itself. Participants may not only be active volunteers in society/ community, but they may be better citizens through their participation in the arts. (*more informed, more open to more views, more prepared to participate in democratic process, more likely to vote and/or run for office, empowered to speak out, feel more a part of a community, interested in education, etc.)

Christopher Gates, past president of the National Urban League and executive director of PACE, suggests "America is in the process of renewing her democracy one community at a time." Gates looks to groups that former NCL Chair John Gardner referred to as "community guardians" – "those that can rise above the fray to convene differing groups to focus on the greater good."

That is where we come in. We can play the role of "Community Guardians" by providing new places, safe places, which can be civic spaces. But you have even more to offer. The cultural assets you represent can all be platforms for engaging citizens around issues that matter. By "assets" I mean your objects, books, buildings and spaces; the stories you tell; the exhibitions and performances you present; your processes of artmaking, preservation, and archeology; and how you use your imagination.

5. What are reasonable and meaningful goals and outcomes of dialogue and civic engagement related to the civic issue?

- ❖ Increased visibility for or awareness of the issue
- ❖ Deepened understanding of the complex dimensions of the issue
- ❖ Broadened participation in dialogue about the issue, including people who are concerned about the issue but don't typically become engaged
- ❖ Learning about causes and effects of the issue
- ❖ Increased tolerance and respect among people who hold different beliefs or values
- ❖ Increased sense of self-efficacy to take action on the issue
- ❖ Recognition of each individual's role in and responsibility for community norms and values
- ❖ Individuals' belief that they do have a voice
- ❖ Civic leaders' deeper understanding of citizen perspectives on the issue

6. How could you employ the arts toward civic engagement/dialogue?

Art as **INVITATION (Convener/Connector)**

You can bring forward the voices of those often silenced or left out or unlikely to participate in public discourse. You can bring together groups of people with divergent viewpoints who might not readily agree to talk or work together in other settings.

Arts as a **SPARK/ catalyst**

Art, literature, history, archeology, and historic preservation can all be the **catalyst** for exploring dimensions of a civic issue, the questions surrounding it, and multiple or alternative perspectives on it. It can use both verbal and non-verbal techniques, including metaphor, abstraction, humor, juxtaposition, and symbol. How can you tie your public programs to current civic issues and create dialogue opportunities?

Art as **SPACE (Container)**

In addition to offering physical settings, you can offer psychological, experiential, and intellectual space conducive to reflection and discussion. Art taps and validates emotions in civic dialogue, giving permission for people to express emotions in public space. It can create empathy among participants, helping people suspend judgment and hear each other in new ways.

Art as a **FORM (construct)**

Art provides alternative forms of dialogue and engagement. Dance, poetry, theater, performance art, and other forms, when they embody dialogue in their structure or processes, may carry meaning and communicate beyond the limits of conventional language.

Table exercise: Ask yourselves –
What are the issues on which my community needs to engage?
What role can our agency play?
What is one way you could augment a program you are planning to expand the civic engagement and dialogue opportunities in your community?
What could we do together?

Best Practices:

- ❖ Be in the community for informal networking and formal partnering.

- ❖ Start with art/artist: What potential does the art offer? What are the issues it raises or addresses?

OR

- Start with the community: What are the issues? Who cares? Who holds a stake? What is already happening? What can you bring to it? What art/artist can we bring? What role can we play? Work with what you have: Space, Artists, staff, Rehearsals, Works in progress.

- ❖ Move from PRODUCT thinking to PROJECT thinking.
- ❖ Design programs and projects that utilize the unique capacities of art, integrating art in engagement and engagement in art.
- ❖ Break conventions around audience connection.
- ❖ Build capacity to design and facilitate dialogue.
- ❖ Offer dialogue and engagement opportunities on a regular basis.

There are many ways in which people engage in civic and community life—from staying informed and educated about issues to voicing concerns to volunteering, community organizing, and voting. The arts are shaping a new paradigm of civic engagement.