

Animating Democracy

Americans for the Arts

Animating Democracy is premised on the idea that a democracy is animated when an informed public is engaged in active dialogue on issues affecting their daily lives and that the arts can play a pivotal role in the renewal of civic dialogue. Animating Democracy successfully shines a light on vital field practice and unpacks the underpinnings of its efficacy. The art and humanities have demonstrated their potency to illuminate civic issues. More specifically, Animating Democracy shows that, through intentional effort, the arts and humanities can serve as an invitation to participate, a spark for civic engagement, a space for civic dialogue, and be a unique form of dialogue. The arts and humanities can open up new ways of looking at issues, give voice to multiple and nuanced perspectives, and bring about better understanding of the complex dimensions and implications of issues.

Background¹

In 1996, the Ford Foundation awarded a grant to Americans for the Arts to profile a representative selection of artists and arts and cultural organizations whose work engages the public in dialogue on key civic issues. The resulting report, *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue²*, maps the field, identifies issues and trends, and suggests opportunities for field leaders, policy makers, and funders to work together to strengthen activity in this dynamic arena. The study revealed pivotal and innovating roles that the arts can play in the renewal of civic dialogue as well as challenges faced by arts and cultural organizations as they engage in this work. Following the study, the Animating Democracy program was conceived to foster artistic activity of quality and significance that encourages civic dialogue on important contemporary issues.

In brief, Animating Democracy seeks to advance the creation and presentation of innovative arts-based civic dialogue work. Through support of an identified set of 35 projects and a study of their practices, Americans for the Arts examined the philosophical, practical, and social dimensions of this work and helped artists and cultural organizations involved in those projects learn from their experience. These lessons are shared broadly with artists, cultural leaders, scholars, public policy makers, civic dialogue organizers, and funders through an interactive web³ site and database, convenings, publications, and other means.

¹ The original American spelling of the text has been kept intentionally.

² http://www.americansforthearts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/pdf/reading_room/Animating_Democracy_Study.pdf

³ <http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/>

Animating Democracy's understanding of the nature of arts-based civic dialogue work evolved significantly over the course of the initiative to affirm and embrace culturally diverse forms of public exchange, the nonverbal as well as verbal, a deeper understanding of multiple perspectives in both dialogue and art, and a valuing of the personal and the emotional in arts-based civic dialogue. The operative definition of arts – or humanities – based civic dialogue developed by Animating Democracy is this:

In *arts or humanities-based civic dialogue*, the artistic process and/or art/ humanities presentation provides a key focus, catalyst, forum or form for public dialogue on the issue. Opportunities for dialogue are embedded in or connected to the arts experience. Arts-based civic dialogue may draw upon any of the arts or humanities disciplines and the spectrum of community-based, experimental, mainstream, or popular approaches to making or presenting art. Individual artists or companies, community-based arts or cultural organizations, or large institutions, may undertake arts-based civic dialogue utilizing a wide range of artistic practice and dialogic methods.

What does arts-based civic dialogue look like?

The projects supported by Animating Democracy demonstrate the range of what arts-based civic dialogue can look like. In some cases, art or cultural practice includes dialogue in process or product; in other cases, art presents an opportunity to hold dialogue activities in conjunction with it. The following projects give a picture of how the arts and humanities got people talking together in interesting, deeper, and purposeful ways about issues that affect their lives, in hopes of better understanding the complexities, dimensions and implications of those issues.

A year after a devastating elementary school shooting in Flint, Michigan, Flint Youth Theatre (FYT) developed a compelling new play... *My Soul to Take* became a focal point for theatergoers and community members to revisit the escalating and painful issue of school violence. Youth explored dimensions of the issue through participation in process drama workshops, facilitated by artist Gillian Eaton, and through curriculum-based efforts related to their experience of the play. These workshops informed development of the play. Stylistically atypical of most youth theater in its nonlinear, collage style and its treatment of the subject, it captured a swirl of opinions surrounding the shooting. Over several months, a diverse set of dialogue opportunities, organized by FYT and collaborating education, neighborhood crime prevention, and community

organizations, aimed to coalesce fragmented efforts to address school violence. Over 100 community members met in small Study Circles groups to consider causes, effects, and options for action. The Pied Piper (the play's central metaphor) and the question implored through the voices of children, "Can't somebody do something?" became a call to reinvigorate community dialogue and move toward action on this pressing issue.

On the island of Hawai'i, residents of the rural region of Kohala deliberated how best to restore a statue of King Kamehameha I, a hero revered as the indigenous unifier of the Hawai'ian islands and native son to Kohala. Should the statue be restored to the mainland artist's original intent of gold and bronze finish, or should it be re-painted in life-like colors, thereby continuing a longstanding community tradition? Through the respectful collaboration of conservator Glenn Wharton, the Hawai'i Alliance for Arts Education, and Kohala community and cultural workers, many activities engaged local residents in the decision-making process. Drawing from both indigenous Hawai'ian and Euro-American traditions of community engagement and public discourse, activities included hula ki'i (image dance puppetry), "talk story," consultation with kapuna (elders), a high school debate with public forum, and an opinion ballot. Through these activities, larger issues of history, identity, ownership, development, tourism, and preservation were raised, and consensus was eventually reached to continue the community's practice of painting the statue. The statue, a pre-existing work of art, became the focal point for civic dialogue and offered an entry to a larger set of issues; at the same time, art making or cultural practice that was dialogic in structure was utilized to educate, stimulate and engage community participation.

The Andy Warhol Museum's exhibition of *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* offers a very different model of arts-based civic dialogue. With tensions heightened by a spate of racially motivated killings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the Warhol Museum presented *Without Sanctuary* – a touring collection of photographic prints and postcards documenting the history of lynching in the U.S. – in order to create a platform for dialogues on race in the city. The museum offered space for community groups to hold meetings and, in partnership with the YMCA's Center for Race Relations, daily dialogues for the public were scheduled in which artist/educators led opportunities in the galleries to help visitors reflect on their experience. These and a range of other public and educational programs drew local media attention, which, in turn, prompted further public discourse. *Without Sanctuary* at the Warhol provoked multiple and intersecting ripples of dialogue among visitors to the exhibition, between the museum and

partners, within a large community planning committee, as well as inside the institution among staff, board, and artist/educators. Partnership between the art museum and the Center for Race Relations was essential to dialogue efforts having a credible presence in the community.

What civic impact does arts-based dialogue have?

Arts-based civic dialogue projects succeed in making a difference in their communities in many ways; some even contributing to national public discourse. Many projects broaden citizen voice and participation, empowering and giving disenfranchised groups access to the civic realm who had not felt a welcoming entry point before. Arts and humanities are particularly effective in revealing the social or affective dimensions of civic issues and catalyzing dialogue around those aspects. The goal of action or policy change is most often defined when a cultural organization has a long-term commitment to that issue and/or activist leadership driving the effort. Arts-based civic dialogue and engagement projects:

1. Expand participation in civic dialogue, by increasing the numbers and/or diversity of people who typically would engage. Arts and cultural projects compel more people to engage than might otherwise participate in civic dialogue by focused and often sustained attention to the issue and by attracting people to and involving them through arts and culture.
2. Increase access to and empower groups typically excluded or on the margins of civic discourse. Arts-based civic dialogue provides new access to the civic realm for people of color, youth, recent immigrants and refugees, and the poor. Groups stake claim to civic space—literal and symbolic—and, through art and culture find safe space, points of entry, and confidence to participate in public conversation.
3. Enhance public awareness and understanding of civic issues. Projects deepen understanding of the complex dimensions of civic issues, focusing on both human and political dimensions, and on gray areas not typically explored via the media or public debates. Arts-based civic dialogue fosters empathy and understanding of perspectives held by others that are different than one's own. Some projects cast a wider lens to connect local issues with national and global concerns, enabling people to see the interrelatedness of issues.

4. Effect shifts in thinking and attitudes about an issue. Often the result is a greater openness to listen and consider other views and increased tolerance and respect for different perspectives. Sometimes actual shifts in attitude or position occur through the alternatives explored through art and dialogue. Sustained projects see greater interaction and improved relations between people holding different perspectives, either within a particular community or between different communities. Art and dialogue projects often foster a feeling of hope; that deeper understanding of the sources of civic issues and progress in public discourse can lead to positive change.

5. Increase participants' sense of self-efficacy and collective efficacy to take action. Arts-based civic dialogue projects cause individuals to reflect on their own relationship to civic issues, often bringing about a realization of one's own role in and responsibility for community norms and values. Motivated by projects, individuals make efforts, sometimes small and personal, sometimes connected to larger civic endeavors.

6. Enhanced quality of and capacity for civic dialogue. In general, the unique qualities of dialogue as distinguished from other forms of public exchange and debate are better understood, and the value of dialogue as a means toward deeper understanding and respect among people is embraced. Some projects help to shift the contentious tenor of public debate to a more open and receptive space for listening, expressing, and hearing alternative views. Capacity to convene and facilitate civic dialogue is increased, often through training individuals in dialogue facilitation skills.

7. Engage civic leaders in a mutually responsive environment with citizens and stakeholders. Civic leaders become informed about the issue at new and different levels. They often hear and publicly recognize voices within the community that are otherwise not heard from or considered within civic discourse. Increased trust and improved relations can result from arts-based civic dialogue efforts among leaders or between citizens and leaders.

8. Contribute to public discourse on issues. Arts-based civic dialogue projects consciously contribute new ways of framing issues, stories, and perspectives to existing civic discourse on an issue. The value of structured dialogue was established within community leadership and among citizens. In many cases, projects stimulate new or extended efforts in arts-based civic dialogue or engagement.

How do cultural organizations achieve these civic impacts?

Clear intent and good planning is a foundation for the most successful projects. It results in arts-based civic dialogue efforts that build mutually beneficial partnerships between arts and dialogue organizations and between arts and community organizations, deepen the dialogue, broadened public participation, and enhance civic impact.

Understanding context for and current public discourse around a civic issue is key to defining appropriate and reasonable civic goals and to designing impactful arts-based civic dialogue efforts. Cultural organizations are conscious of defining civic outcomes that are feasible but that also stretch and connect with other community efforts and discourse around an issue.

Artists and cultural organizations help to put and keep issues that may be nascent, below the surface, deferred, or systemic in nature into the public spotlight. By highlighting or exploring subjects not being widely addressed, arts-based civic dialogue projects raise public consciousness and bring media attention to important civic issues. Artists and cultural organizations offer new lenses for framing generative questions for civic dialogue.

Art helps to break down some of the typical barriers to participation by offering an inclusive invitation, a compelling format, reflecting various publics in the art itself, and creating safe space for dialogue. Integrating art into the process of dialogue serves to introduce new topic areas and impart information in creative ways, reinvigorating discussion and breaking down barriers among participants. Cultural spaces and art experiences sometimes offer alternatives that feel safer to some community segments who would not venture into more traditional civic spaces. Cultural organizations transform other social and civic spaces through art to enhance their conduciveness to public dialogue. However, cultural organizations are not universally perceived as neutral or safe spaces and are sometimes unaware of their own biases or others' perceptions of their power. Sensitive collaborations with community and dialogue partners and thoughtful dialogue design and facilitation are also crucial.

Arts and humanities efforts frequently challenge traditional power dynamics that privilege certain viewpoints, segments, or ways of working in a community and serve to equalize power in the dialogue experience. Cultural organizations and artists invest in understanding the history, current power dynamics, and the perceptions various participants hold of the other. Artistic techniques such as story circles, which are inherently democratic in structure, foster equality.

Sometimes artwork is consciously chosen or created knowing it would challenge power and authority and thereby bring new voices into the dialogue.

The arts prove to be a natural container and a motivating force to enable youth to express their perspectives but also to hear and consider others. Young people are valued for their insights and as “knowledge producers;” their voices given a place within the broader civic discourse of their communities. Aesthetic forms that are part of contemporary youth culture, such as hip hop, poetry, spoken word, and popular music are an effective route for youth to explore civic issues because of their aesthetics and political content. Young people grow as people, artists, citizens, and leaders in the context of their participation in arts-based civic engagement projects. Arts-based civic dialogue projects prepares young people to speak to power through their art as well as directly in public forums. In immigrant communities in particular, one challenge is to work across generations in ways that value young people while not disempowering the adult community or undermining traditional cultural values and expressions.

How do the arts and humanities uniquely contribute to civic dialogue?

Animating Democracy poses an important question about the form, not just the function of art. Recognizing that many artistic forms and processes are inherently dialogic in nature, Animating Democracy set out to better understand how creative activity functions as a *form* of dialogue and a *forum* for dialogue. Many artists and cultural organizations use the opportunity of their arts-based civic dialogue projects to look deeply into “the dialogic within the creative.”

Creative activity is an effective form of dialogue, in which dialogue is an aesthetic element or dialogue practices are woven into the artistic experience. Artists, curators, and programmers call upon basic qualities and strategies of art such as *metaphor*, *abstraction*, and *humor*, as well as a range of *documentary* approaches, for their most potent effects in generating civic dialogue. Metaphor creates fresh associations and expands the form, vocabulary, or mode of dialogue bringing into focus what is yet unclear and opening up alternative pathways to explore an issue. Like metaphor, abstraction opens space for different interpretations, thereby inviting multiple perspectives into dialogue. Abstract art forms demonstrate a power to unlock core emotional and visceral responses to issues. In addition, nonlinear structures, challenging juxtapositions, and ambiguity in art create new possibilities of conceptualizing issues.

Nonverbal art forms such as dance or visual art are found to communicate ideas and experiences

in ways that contribute to meaning and understanding. Things that people are afraid, reluctant, or unable to say verbally often get expressed more easily through movement or images. When words seem more vulnerable, an experience too intense, or the stakes too high to speak directly, people find a kind of “safe space” in silent or abstract creative activity. The use of non-verbal approaches, thus, makes dialogue more inclusive.

The use of personal story allows participants to speak freely about feelings, connect with civic issues on an intimate, visceral level, gain respect and empathy for each other, and form lasting bonds. The particular approach of story circles emphasize equity by providing a democratic structure of listening and responding to others. Other particular dialogic art forms – traditional Filipino balagtasan, contemporary freestyle poetry, or traditional Hawai’ian image dance with puppets – unlike literal debate, utilize rhythm, imagery, rhyme, giving creative structure to the expression of strong emotions. Such forms open the audience to new ways of hearing differing or opposing points of view, and prepare them to engage in their own dialogue in more creative, sensitive ways that went beyond expected rhetoric.

Creative activity functions as a forum for dialogue, in which dialogue occurred in the process of creating art or artistic elements contribute to effective dialogue. Dialogue frequently occurs among artists and community participants in the process of creating art, in the form of group cooperation, deliberation on aesthetic choices, or in talking about the issue content of the art being made. Engaging people in dialogue about issues and ideas is often made easier and the quality of dialogue made deeper when people are involved in the art making process. Art making helps “level the encounter” – people who usually exist in hierarchical relationships find themselves in new, unexpected arrangements of authority, expertise, or newly-discovered talents.

Contested sites of history and historic sites of memory also serve as a forum for civic dialogue and art proves an effective companion in civic dialogue endeavors. The search for historical truth(s) in contested, hidden, denied or previously untold histories opens up deep dialogue on enduring moral and ethical issues that resonate in contemporary society. Heritage tourism efforts provide an impetus for dialogue about the meaning of historic sites and how to interpret and make them relevant to various visitors. The processes of historic research and preservation offer an opportunity for dialogue about broader civic issues. Art – storytelling, theater, film, public art, visual art – serve to present history in different forms and is often the propelling agent for dialogue that links history and contemporary issues.

What effects does the intent for civic dialogue have on artistic work and practice?

The intent for civic dialogue offers fertile ground for particular artistic investigations by artists, curators, and programmers. Dialogue enhances meaning in audience's experience of artistic works. Traditional art forms, works from the canon, and historic objects and sites gain new currency and are imbued with new meaning when linked to contemporary issues and opportunities for civic dialogue.

Dialogue proves to be a productive research and planning methodology to strengthen the issue content of the creative work. Dialogic approaches to dramaturgy and gaining community feedback can be employed to address concerns about authenticity of voices, context, and content around an issue. In these approaches, key stakeholders and community members are invested with increased creative authority.

Innovative artistic forms and programmatic formats result from efforts to unite art and dialogue. Museums and orchestras experiment beyond the conventions of educational and audience development formats, adapting and creating new programmatic approaches that build civic purpose into curatorial intent. Projects serving youth raise the bar in terms of investigating aesthetic and civic interests at complex levels and honoring youth emotion and intelligence in the dialogue. One theater for young people viewed civic dialogue as a strategy to further challenge standard narrative structures and the "message and moral" norms prevalent in much theater for young audiences.

Artists have to reconcile their own strong positions on issues in the context of arts-based civic dialogue projects and decide if and when to express a point of view or be deliberately provocative with their art. One of the most challenging questions artists and cultural organizations face is whether art might have to be "neutral" (or would get neutralized) if one of its goals is to incorporate or elicit multiple perspectives on an issue. The idea of "multipartiality" is helpful to many artists and programmers as it encourages multiple and even strong perspectives in the art itself without neutralizing voices. Provocative art requires specific strategies to ensure that all perspectives are equally welcomed in dialogues.

Careful framing of the project and its intent, explaining why the particular artwork is chosen, thoughtful designing of dialogue opportunities, and involving experienced facilitators who can navigate potential conflict and challenges are important strategies. While artists are often

compelled to express their own points of view in their art or as participants in a dialogue, they recognize that when they are operating as dialogue facilitators they need to be more neutral.

Ethical concerns can emerge as artists work with dialogue materials to create the art. Such concerns arise when editing, fictionalizing, compositing characters, or simply presenting publicly the actual words of real people. Choices in editing and creation raise decisions about whose interests prevail – subject’s, community’s, or artist’s – and to what degree. Artists sometimes reckon with issues of artistic control and quality when creative authority is shared in community-based process. Transparency of process is critical in terms of helping participants and organizers understand how dialogue material could be used and transformed in the final artistic work and in sustaining an honest and open relationship over the course of a project.

What are the most common challenges in connecting art and civic dialogue?

Creating meaningful civic dialogue often requires changing the structure and format of arts events or activities to prepare and engage audiences effectively. A clear and shared sense of purpose is needed among organizers and participants to effectively focus the dialogue on the civic issue. New formats and structures require a shift in expectations on the part of audiences and overt strategies to assist with this shift. Promotional materials need to emphasize that this is not “the usual night out at the theater or symphony.” Orientation and introduction are also important to help convey purpose and set the tone of the event. Multiple engagements with the same group over time make achieving meaningful dialogue more likely than single-session dialogues.

Making transitions between art experiences to dialogue is pivotal and challenging. Artists and cultural organizations know that it can be difficult for participants and audiences to switch from the private experience or the intense emotions evoked by a work of art to the “rational” or intellectual discourse expected in civic dialogue. The most successful dialogues at arts events result when facilitators tailor format and approach specifically to the artistic work. One challenge is keeping the art present in the dialogue, both respecting people’s natural desire to address the artistic work, but also drawing upon it to move the dialogue. Heavy-handed shifts to a formal dialogue mode have the effect of deflating energy, emotion, and passion generated by the experience of the art.

Organizers need to provide information and resources at the event for audience members who are spurred by the experience to learn more about the issue, connect to other dialogue

opportunities, or figure out how they could take action. Cultural organizations can help sustain attention to the issue by anticipating the question, “What can I do now?”

Assessing civic impact poses many questions and new challenges. Cultural groups are pressed to define what is meant by “civic” impact, what evidence to look for, and what to document and track. They rely heavily upon anecdotes and testimonial evidence to interpret the effects of projects on participants but also try pre- and post-experience surveys to understand less tangible outcomes such as shifts in attitudes or understanding. Some projects feel they fall short of their potential for civic impact. When civic impact is not achieved, it is frequently because civic intent is not clearly focused, organizers frame too ambitious a goal, or the project does not link in relevant ways to the issue, its stakeholders, or to current public discourse on it. The challenge of evaluating long-term civic impact is unresolved. Most cultural organizations find it difficult to imagine sustaining attention on the effects of a particular project more than a few months following its conclusion.

Getting a representative mix of people to participate is one of the most significant challenges. This challenge is shared with the dialogue field at large. Typically people who attend formal dialogue programs are those who enjoy the luxury of time, resources, and intellectual engagement (e.g. students, retirees, professionals who work in fields closely related to the subject, and some activists). Who does not participate are people who have been historically excluded or oppressed. Still other obstacles relate to language and cultural modes of participation that differ from the dominant western orientation. Another challenge shared with civic dialogue organizers is the paradox that civic dialogue aims to engage multiple viewpoints, but that those who are most likely to participate in dialogue or civically engaged art tend to be politically progressive.

What are the implications of Animating Democracy?

More than a program title, “animating democracy” captures the spirit, humanity, and vitality that are the unique hallmarks of how the arts and humanities engage people in civic life. The arts and humanities have proven their potential to contribute in valuable and unique ways toward civic goals. Arts, cultural, and history organizations can be strong partners in fostering productive dialogue and engagement, in working through issues via both intra and intergroup exchange.

Artists and organizations with the capacity to address contemporary issues such as immigration, racial profiling, the role of same sex couples, and the implications of demographic change will

have agency as they provide options for participation and lend important content, diversity, and humanity to difficult public discourse. Artists and arts and humanities organizations have been and will continue to facilitate a revisiting of history to search for the fuller truth and historic roots of contemporary issues and to work toward reconciliation of deep-seated divisions between people.

Within arts and humanities fields, the topic of civic efficacy has currency. Artists are deconstructing and documenting previously intuitive practices in order to refine them and pass them on through training. Cultural institutions in all disciplines and of all sizes are considering their civic assets and deficiencies. Funders are considering the philanthropy's civic mission as a context for grant making. And, the dialogue and deliberation field has embraced a role for the arts as a form and forum for dialogue. Continued investments in programming, field capacity, and knowledge building will further catalyze efforts to animate democracy through the arts and humanities.

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