

The Artist, Institution, Community Triangle

SESSION DESCRIPTION: Whether the impulse to develop an arts-based civic dialogue project originates with the artist, the cultural institution, or a civic group, as projects evolve, collaborating partners find that building trust and maintaining a shared vision for the project is challenging. As Animating Democracy projects developed, partner expectations were defined and redefined. Roles were negotiated and re-negotiated as community engagement processes unfolded to bring the community participants themselves into a central role. The shifting kaleidoscope of perspectives surfaced many multi-faceted questions: Who owns the project? Who defines and represents "local culture"? How should political divisions and power relations within the community be acknowledged or addressed? Who is to maintain the relationships and the momentum around the issues developed through this project? In this session, participants will consider these issues of trust and power, accountability and sustainability, and ethics and discuss how civic engagement projects challenge existing models for artist residencies, outreach, and marketing.

PRESENTERS: *Sandy Agustin, Intermedia Arts, Mary Keefe, Hope Community, Inc.; Deborah Grotfeldt, Project Row Houses*

RESPONDENT: *Selma Jackson, 4 W Circle Enterprises*

SESSION LEADER: *Jane Hirshberg, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange*

Jane Hirshberg: *Jane began the session by introducing a simple image for the discussion of project structure: a triangle. One point of the triangle represents the artist. Another point represents the presenting organization or commissioning source—the organization who is initiating the project, setting a goal or vision, the culture broker. The third point represents the community. Sometimes it can be a square or star or other shapes. It's a dynamic structure, sometimes unwieldy, and proposes unanticipated challenges to projects.*

The presenters and respondents will introduce themselves and tell a story about how the structure of a partnership presented challenges, and how that shaped the project and their future work.

Deborah Grotfeldt: *Our work in Houston was founded in 1993 on a site of 22 abandoned tin-roofed project row houses. We talked over a few years. We had a desire to share African American heritage and traditions, to share work, and to have an exchange with other African Americans in the community, instead of only rich white people. Artists found that it would cost more to get houses useable than they would make with their art. They wrote an NEA proposal, researched the project, and got a grant to put the arts project in.*

I learned that our work is often preaching to the choir, and they're already involved in the issue. I wanted to do something more hands-on, so I got involved with this project. Volunteers were not paid.

Every six months, an artist was commissioned to do an art installation. Each artist received a \$2,000 commission fee and \$500 budget to take over this house for artwork and to interact with community and staff. We presented over 160 projects, with a focus on African American history/issues/heritage/culture. Remaining houses were used for afterschool and summer programs for kids—art-related, tutoring, homework.

Over time, people would ask if these houses would be for rent. "Why are you taking up valuable housing in our community for art?" People talked about the cycle of teen motherhood in the neighborhood. We created a young mothers residential program in seven of the houses to respond to this expressed need by people in the area.

Other projects/sites included a ballroom site and another site for a teen program. The next project will encompass 35 blocks surrounding the area. There's a need to save a little corner of African American history—a history of achievement, not a dead history.

The process is creative—it feels less like a blueprint than an improvisation.

One challenge to their work has been showing graphic work in a family setting. We invited a wood block artist who takes up issues of violence, child abuse, and neglect. Issues of not wanting to engage in censorship came up among organizers. Some felt issues he presented through his art weren't germane to talking about the achievements and challenges of this population. The discussion generated interest in the exhibit. People were looking through the

windows to see the work before installation was open. Organizers of the project trusted the artist's instincts—no confrontation, lots of opportunities. As a staff, we learned the importance of taking about the potential for problems with content and presentation. The lesson learned was to trust the artist and trust the process.

Comment: Are you following same plan for Detroit?

Deborah Grotfeldt: We rehabilitated two houses for girls who are moms, and a park on the campus in a run down area that is now a public space.

Comment: A whole house for art?

Deborah Grotfeldt: Yes, no living space. The rest of the houses are for afterschool programs.

Jane Hirshberg: Are you the culture broker? How do you see this in relation to the rest of the community?

Deborah Grotfeldt: We are all three simultaneously: organization, artist, community. Not a triangle of separate entities, but a Venn diagram of three interlocking circles.

Sandy Agustin: *Sandy began with a slide presentation.* Intermedia is a 30-year old arts organization housed in an old body shop in south Minneapolis. We thought about the community around us. Where is the best fit for us? We connected originally (as video program) to the University of Minnesota. We chose this neighborhood because of changes in the neighborhood, and things that hadn't changed over many years. It's accessible by bus, has the largest artist base in the zip code, and has artists from around the area.

Artists are always part of the building. A legal graffiti wall on the back of building is a constant space for dialogue between graffiti artists. We'll be inviting young and older graffiti artists in to figure out what this should be, as there are issues arising about protocols.

People Places Connections project. The community came together with five artists to look at gentrification in a five-mile stretch of abandon railroad which is now a midtown greenway that slices through many communities and neighborhoods. Artists include Wendy Morris, Ta-Coumba Aiken, Marilyn Lindstrom, Victor Yopez, Douglas Ewart.

The charge for the project: What makes you feel safe? After 9/11, ideas became focused around safety in new ways. We gathered information in different ways: large cards people filled out as they walked in, interviews, large and small groups experimenting with their own processes.

Organization as cultural broker: Bring artists and coming together in partnership. The project was "also about the dynamic that happens in-between the actual happening."

Intersections between art and community development: What is dialogue and how does that process happen with artists?

Comment: We don't serve the community, we *are* the community. This comment raises questions. Is this true? Is this arrogant? What have we come to that's important? Who will take care of and nurture the idea vs. who owns the idea? In the last year of project, we wondered about and focused more on how these artists use their art to stimulate dialogue. Wendy Morris has been able to articulate that.

Mary Keefe: Hope Community has been organizing for 25 to 30 years. When we got involved in Animating Democracy through Sandy, I started to understand how close these two worlds—artists and organizers—are. For first time, Hope has an art project to formalize this connection.

Hope is in a tough neighborhood. There are five crack houses in one block, abandoned buildings, families left behind. People in the shelter felt under siege. Hope no longer does shelter. We are on a mission to save the neighborhood—not to build houses and isolate, but to reconnect as a community. This community has 20,000 people and is a traditional Native American neighborhood—70 percent are people of color, from different African countries, and Latino. They don't have a voice, and don't trust or get involved in government projects. Hope refused to do social service and see people as clients; this is a community-building organization. We pulled people together for a trust-building process—900 people over the last several years. Afterschool programs, a community center and office space,

lots of public space. We've been spending energy in the hood growing partnerships. We don't limit involvement to tenants, to be inclusive.

We met Intermedia and worked with them. How to bring artists in, to bring out the voices of those in the neighborhood or community? Art could be a way to publicly claim space and culture. It invites people to be part of the community and to help them feel energized.

Artists have lots of experience with working with community members. An issue for them is: Who is shaping the relationship, the artist or the organizer? We relate to these people all of the time and we want to stay in the equation. We had to deal on a daily basis with this tension between us and the artist *vis-à-vis* community. We used the project to shape the dialogue between the artist and Hope, and addressed it in that way.

Kids took over the tent for mosaic project. The artist didn't perceive originally that kids could do this. They were surprised but flexible and that's the way it went. It reinforced that we have a whole different relationship to art. We saw art as a companion to our work, but now we see it in an interconnected way. This learning and this energy are already leading to future projects and thinking. Is there a way we can work long term for long-term connectedness in communities?

Sandy Agustin: With the Hope partnership, we bit off more than we could chew. Too many artists in too many communities at the same time. The artists went into the project with their approaches and stayed with a regular residency model. The challenge is how to make artists part of an evolving dialogue model. What is the artist's role outside of a regular residency model? In future, we will approach it differently.

Comment: You said the artists expected you to step out of the picture. Can you talk more about that?

Mary Keefe: We had two to three meetings each week to work through assumptions and misunderstandings. Hope Community stayed very close to the project. People wondered when dialogue would happen, as if it would stand alone, but dialogue came through the whole thing. We had three intentional reflections at the end with different groups.

DISCUSSION

Jane Hirshberg: When Dance Exchange works as a touring artist for a project or performance, our experience is that presenters—as culture brokers—don't often see themselves as being involved. They direct people to the room the event is in, without ever going into the room.

Cindy Ornstein: The presenter is setting up a barrier if she/he doesn't step into the project. If you live in the community, don't act on the community but with the community. Encourage presenters to step over that threshold.

Sandy Agustin: An example is a YMCA project in which the artist was devastated by being abandoned by them and had to take over their role. It's important to be sure the full presenting organization has ownership, investment, and knowledge of the project. Keep reminding the artist that they aren't the presenter. That needs to be supported.

Cindy Ornstein: Check out track their record of making and keeping promises, or you'll get caught off guard.

Selma Jackson: I'm from Brooklyn, New York. 4W Circle is a retail incubator. I observed that people of color couldn't get financing at the bank where I worked. Our group funds people to start small businesses. In 1998, the BAM local development corporation wanted to create a cultural district. The community was offended, as if culture didn't already exist. This area has one of the largest black-owned commercial districts in the city and people there are artists in true sense, artists of all kinds. We started working on getting foundation money, city money, and land for the Performing Arts Library, a commercial space with housing, and a new theatre. The local development corporation came with a set plan without any conversation with community. Fort Greene grassroots groups tried to intervene to stop it, but it was too powerful a machine. 9/11 happened and moneys allocated were put on hold. Clergy in the area got together to unify grassroots groups to stop the fast train. Different clergy from four to five denominations pulled together artists, education advocates, residents, and business owners to talk about how they felt about this externally-imposed cultural district.

Between Spring 2002 and October 2003, we got together a town hall meeting. It was full. Developers showed up and characterized this as purely a racial divide. They didn't realize their funders were residents and were at the meeting. Funders were impressed. The funding on hold became a bigger question. Funders got together with clergy to ask for a meeting for dialogue. It was a difficult project. Developers give the illusion that they are working with community to get money released from funders, although they weren't really working with community. (*Selma gave an example of how developers tried to circumvent the system through the state legislature.*) Developers were manipulative and misled. I helped intervene to protect business owners and got developers back to the table.

Cindy Ornstein: What did developers want to do?

Selma Jackson: Rent space to arts groups/artists.

Mary Keefe: How did the developers impose their sense of art on the neighborhood?

Selma Jackson: Fort Greene/Clinton is a community with natural boundaries different from what developers are articulating. Developers haven't reached out to any area artists. Where do you get your next generation of artists? Developers are opposed to the school and they don't want to include it as being in the district, although it's in Clinton Hills. Example: 651 Arts is a 12-year old project caught in power struggle with BAM. Also, there's the issue of gentrification.

Sandy Agustin: An observation about burnout. There's so much going on and so many layers. How do you sustain relationships, and how do artists stay part of the conversation over so long?

Selma Jackson: Four committees were willing to sit down with the developer. Lots of community involvement in dialogue. It seems very difficult—education, housing, economic development, and artists.

Deborah Grotfeldt: What is the local culture and who defines it?

Selma spoke to the character of neighborhood artists, their individuality, and quality.

Jane Hirshberg: What can be learned from these experiences where structure is pre-empted by a more powerful player in the food chain?

Selma Jackson: I learned something from an earlier Animating Democracy meeting. It is incumbent upon the community to move beyond the project and engage in dialogue about the impact of changes locally, regionally, and beyond. I then began looking at this project in the context of development throughout Brooklyn.

Mary Keefe: I learned that they had to own the land. We couldn't rely on communication and dialogue alone.

Q: This is a very interesting thing to think about. It requires that we speak to community every time there is an issue that affects them. Would Selma's group like this committee to be a gatekeeper?

A participant who had lived in this neighborhood related this to an unsuspecting community where land has been appropriated for a big golf development.

Jane Hirshberg: Here's a question for group discussion. Who maintains the relationships and momentum for the issues that were explored in the project?

Selma Jackson: What are we going to continue to think about and how can we perpetuate the dialogue and the relationships with community partners?

Jane Hirshberg: Deborah brought forward problems with an artist/event. Though the artist came and went, there was dialogue about that project—different models. How can threads and energy begun by projects be woven and continued in future work? I'm curious to hear your stories.

John Malpede: One project I did focused on whether there was history on Skid Row. What has changed and what hasn't? Gentrification, lots of homelessness, and drug abuse. We did a storefront and video project. Performers came in and talked, and then immediately went back to performance. They talked about new permanent residents. A Skid Row History Museum could be an anchor, and maybe have a range of housing—affordable to high rent. A trend among developers is to piggyback on the presence of artists to gentrify areas.

Mary Keefe: Now people want an artist in our midst. Art is really rising up for us, from the community. We're having to think harder about a range of relationships and push our boundaries.

Deborah Grotfeldt: Art is not a permanent thing for us. What happens in the hearts and minds of people who attend is. Sustainability is not physical—it's the experience of the project that lingers.

Cindy Ornstein: Relationships in the Ohio project stimulated grassroots formation of a young people's Latino project, independent of the producing agency except in a tangential role. It's desire, energy.

Selma Jackson: Synergy is what can linger, because we see there is work that needs to be done and we can have a voice together in the community.

A participant gave an example of a long-term project in Chicago. It is changing the use of public spaces, for example, to provide safety for seniors. She/he also discussed projects in 16 neighborhoods. What the community wanted was: jobs, housing, public art, and public spaces. She/he was shocked by the place of the arts in these depressed areas.

Joan Lazarus: New relationships have been formed within each point of the triangle, as well across points. Artists are now in new relationships with each other and in dialogue in ways that didn't occur before these projects.

Sandy Agustin: I see dialogue very differently now. It's a catalyst for building understanding through art. Being more deliberate about dialogue is exciting for us as we go forward with a common language of dialogue. Artists now have a clearer notion of the tool of dialogue, if they choose to use it.

Deborah Grotfeldt: I'm pleased, ready, and even anxious to embrace a structure that is less linear, less oriented to product as opposed to process.

Sandy Agustin: What sustains partnerships and what sustains dialogue? We become a player in dialogue when we have power. And what gives us power? Funding and land.

Selma Jackson: Look at all of the different end goals and approaches to collaboration. There isn't only one way and you have to be open to considering all possibilities. How do you go on once the project is finished? It has to be organic. You can't force it. Some of the projects are only done because money is available. What will you do once the funding is out of the way?

Mary Keefe: Ongoing relationships in the community as part of sustaining this work is important. There are real major issues of power, use of land and major resources, politics, and differing views of neighborhoods' futures.

Jane Hirshberg: There's lots of overlap in this room. It's not so linear a model. There seemed to be evolution from a triangle to a Venn diagram.