

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange: An Aesthetic of Inquiry, an Ethos of Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION BY ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

Throughout the Animating Democracy Initiative, we have seen multiple approaches in exploring the meaning of civic dialogue. Dance Exchange’s project—which analyzed the kinds of dialogue in which the company engages as they develop work in a community setting—gave us a deep insight into art itself as a form of dialogue. The following report offers an outstanding example of a highly respected group that looked deeply into their practices, then found ways to reflect and share those practices in the context of the Animating Democracy construct. It is rich with sidebars, and offers a story within a story as it describes the genesis and development of a particularly powerful residency project.

THE ROOTS OF INQUIRY, THE DNA OF DANCE EXCHANGE

Who gets to dance? Where is it happening? What is it about? Why does it matter?

These four questions are the DNA of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange. Like all DNA they supply the internal coding for much of the work we do, informing innumerable small moments as well as the full sweep of our largest projects. And like DNA, they constitute both the origins and the destiny of the Dance Exchange.

In 1975 these questions led a young choreographer named Liz Lerman to Roosevelt for Senior Citizens (a DC-run residential facility) to seek out older performers for a dance she wanted to make about her mother’s death. Shortly thereafter, inspired by the revelation of bringing together younger and older dancers, Liz founded the Dance Exchange. Twenty-seven years later this institution, grown to international stature as a contemporary dance company, continues to be every bit as motivated by the quest to answer the four questions. Some combination of the “who, where, what, and why” of dance supplies the blueprint for Dance Exchange work, no matter what the task at hand.

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These four questions root the Dance Exchange in an aesthetic of inquiry that leads us to ask many other questions as a core function of our artmaking process. The questions we ask in the artistic process help to initiate many dialogues: internally among the artists of the company, at the community level as we encounter wider circles of artists and participants, and externally as we engage with the public.

Beyond their power to spark exchange, the four questions lead to a culture of dialogue in even more essential ways. As Patricia Romney says in “The Art of Dialogue!”: “Dialogue is a focused conversation, engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing

problems, and questioning thoughts or actions. ... [It] encourages us to recognize and examine the many and varied perspectives that exist in most situations.”

The Dance Exchange often gathers people of diverse bodies, brains, and perspectives to collaborate, listen, and make something together, a process of understanding and problem-solving in which clear and constructive communication is essential. The dance is never exactly the same in any two places; as artists and participants move gradually into unfamiliar territory, they are constantly challenged to collaborate in order to adapt. The artists and their community collaborators engage in topics that are current, vital, curious, unexpected, and always sparking dialogues within and beyond the work. Artists, participants and audiences are consistently engaged at a level where values are at stake, and where human integrity is on the line.

The rich potential of our four questions came to a new level of fruition in the 1990s, with the convergence of several artistic projects. Having operated separate troupes of younger and older dancers throughout the '80s, Liz consolidated these ensembles in 1993 into a single, cross-generational company with five Dance Exchange veterans and five new dancers. Ranging in age from 23 to 70, this group not only spanned six decades but also represented varied sensibilities and backgrounds of faith, ethnicity and ideology. Liz tapped into the diverse voices of this new family of collaborators by creating a series of works exploring the relationships between history, culture, and personal identity.

From 1994-97, the centerpiece of this series was *Shehechianu*, inspired by a Jewish prayer that Liz translated as, "Isn't it amazing that we've all come through our different histories to be together in this moment?" *Shehechianu* used humor and striking theatrical images to address questions like "What sustains you in times of trouble?" "How do the injustices of history still affect us in the present?" "Should we allow the scars passed down from our forebears to heal or to fester?" An intensive process of dialogue within the ensemble, along with research and choreography, fostered the development of these dances, which revealed multiple answers, unexpected connections between personal stories and the colliding truths of our multiple American histories. "Rare are the occasions" wrote Cathryn Harding, reviewing *Shehechianu* in *Dance* magazine, "when you can leave a dance concert with new questions about who you are and how you got that way."

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During the same period, the Dance Exchange undertook a unique commission from the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for an extended residency project focused on the city's historic Naval Shipyard. This military installation, threatened

with closure, employed a large civilian workforce, and was the hub of a variety of environmental and political controversies. For two years, Dance Exchange teams worked with military brass and local artists, nuclear technicians and anti-nuclear activists, a high school band and retired shipbuilders on *The Music Hall's Shipyard Project*. The project culminated in September 1996 in a weeklong festival using dance and story to examine the role of the 200-year-old Yard in the city's history, economics, environment and social progress. That festival, which included dance performance in chapels, bowling alleys, and battleships, revealed a community honoring its past, observing its present, taking stock of its differences, and celebrating itself.

The Shipyard Project was soon widely noted as a maverick example of a community/arts partnership, and an example of the concept of social capital enacted through the arts. In a profile of the project in *Better Together*², Robert Putnam wrote:

[Liz] Lerman had a reputation for a spirit of open inquiry, discovering and respecting people's varied points of view rather than imposing her own or listening only to the voices that echoed hers. ... Projects that "come out of left field" are best, she says, because they make you go somewhere new. ... The "somewhere new" in this case included moving away from art that tended to express a liberal social agenda when it dealt with political or social issues at all. Also, Lerman firmly believed that everyone has a right to tell his or her own story, and the stories of the shipyard workers had never been told publicly, never told in art.

Around 1997, with *The Shipyard Project* completed and *Shehechianu* winding down, a series of chance encounters sparked Liz and the Dance Exchange to begin exploring the ideas of praise and celebration as their next logical step. In communities around the country, could the theme of praise be the key to replicating the scope and depth of *The Shipyard Project*? Might each city contribute something new to a project that would amass a body of beautiful choreography? Soon Liz was formulating the plan for *Hallelujah*, a multi-city project that would make praise in traditional and brand-new ways, with artists and communities building vital connections as they found the material for vivid, entertaining, and inspiring dance.

Animating Democracy had chosen *The Shipyard Project* as a case study in 1998. (The project was written up in *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*. In 1999, as Dance Exchange prepared for the national residency phase of *Hallelujah*, this report spurred us to give deeper consideration to the role of dialogue in our work. On the verge of a community engagement project of unprecedented scope, we had begun to seek ways to define, record, and disseminate our methodology, and we were eager to pursue the opportunity to deepen our practice and our understanding of that practice, guided by the idea of dialogue as a unifying principle.



Hallelujah: In Praise of Fertile Fields, premiered by the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival August 2000. From Left to Right, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange company members Pene McCourty, Margot Greenlee, Martha Wittman, and Marvin Webb.
Credit: Lise Metzger.

THE DIALOGUE AUDIT

The project supported by Animating Democracy was built around a Dialogue Audit, our term for a comprehensive effort to clarify our methods related to dialogue, to view the Dance Exchange's work through the lens of civic dialogue, and to consider the degree to which we were achieving civic dialogue. As we stated in our original proposal, our intention was "to make the integral overt, the organic concrete, and the intuitive intentional." We did this through documentation, analysis, and the development of concrete products. In addition we had some institutional objectives related to dialogue that we pursued in tandem with the audit: to facilitate a process that would result in a print version of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange Toolbox; to

"...To make the integral overt, the organic concrete, and the intuitive intentional."

advance Critical Response Process teaching methods and dissemination of the process; and to examine structures for

collaborative leadership (originally posed as “Artists of the Round Table.”)

Our first challenge was to understand which dimensions of *Hallelujah* could be useful to the field and fruitful for us in the context of the Animating Democracy lab concept. We ultimately decided that, while set in the context of *Hallelujah* as a major initiative in public engagement, our lab would largely focus on study and analysis of the dialogue dimension of our work.

The findings of the audit can be divided into several categories, each addressed in this report:

- Clarification and confirmation of Dance Exchange concepts as they relate to dialogue;
- Analysis of Dance Exchange practice in relation to identified qualities of effective dialogue;
- Excavation of the smallest units, tools, principles, and “dialogue moments;”
- Analysis of a typical Dance Exchange workshop to show how units of dialogue fit together; and
- The role of dialogue in a larger-scale Dance Exchange community residency.

Methods

To conduct the Dialogue Audit we first compiled internal and home-based documentation. Dance Exchange members interviewed one another, identified video records of civic dialogue incidents of that had emerged in our past work, and completed writing assignments relevant to dialogue and our creative process.

Supported by the Animating Democracy grant, staff members were able to join artistic teams at *Hallelujah* sites to collect documentation, including:

- Video interviews with project participants and other stakeholders;
- Documentary video capturing aspects of the Dance Exchange process;
- Written reflection from participants; and
- Video records and written notes of group reflection sessions facilitated by the artists or the humanities director.

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We also had participant observers at residency sites: Sima Rabinowitz, a writer who took part in our Minneapolis *Hallelujah* in June 2001; a small team of students and faculty at the University of Michigan, who were part of a UMS Arts of Citizenship project; and Linda Burnham, writing for Community Arts Network/API Online, who joined the company at 10 of our 15 project sites.

As the centerpiece of the Audit, we conducted a series of videotaped conversations and participatory activities that primarily engaged staff and artists of the Dance Exchange. There were three formats:

Residency Debriefs: After major residencies in the *Hallelujah* project, company artists and some administrators gathered to review highlights, successes, questions, and issues related to the residency in question. We reviewed the material with a view to capturing the civic dialogue component in the activity.

Dialogue “Divulges”: In this format— known as a “divulge” for the amount of information offered and shared— artists, some staff and interns, and the occasional guest would gather for facilitated conversation examining varied aspects of our practices and their civic dialogue dimensions.

Toolbox Development Sessions: In 10 different sessions, the company’s artists, interns and adult students gathered to analyze and document the method and function of a particular Dance Exchange tool. The process entailed group discussion and sometimes included writing activity for the participants.

At their frequent best, particularly in the “divulges,” the audit sessions testified to the power of dialogue. They engaged people with multiple perspectives in open but facilitated exchange, yielding insights and qualitative evidence about the power and the limitations of our work. *Hallelujah* marked a period of unprecedented activity for the Dance Exchange (from January to June of 2001, for instance, we brought *Hallelujah* projects to culmination in five cities), and the company was gathering experiences and accumulating learning very quickly, so the opportunities to pause and reflect were welcome and valuable.

Because we were often reflecting in the divulges on the material we had gathered at project sites, the audit began with our approach to information-gathering and interviews. To avoid asking leading questions in the audit interviews, we developed a “Dialogue Lens,” a series of markers that assessed the degree to which the Dance Exchange was advancing dialogue or creating an environment conducive to dialogue. Instead of asking interviewees whether they were experiencing civic dialogue in the course of a project, we would wait for some of the dialogue markers (e.g., trust, leveling of hierarchies) to arise in response to more general questions, and then pursue the topics in greater depth.

The values of the audit were typical of the Dance Exchange ethos: We had structure and method, but stayed susceptible to organic variations and the possibility that the process might lead us, rather than vice versa. In addition to the Dialogue Lens, the structural elements included:

• **Viewing “chunks”:** We would view and respond to video of our current work, including performance segments,

THE DIALOGUE LENS

Dialogue functions and facilitations to watch for in Dance Exchange process:

- How have we encouraged people to express and recognize both commonalities and differences?
- How has an encounter revealed a range rather than a polarity of opinion or experience?
- How have we facilitated a collaboration toward mutual understanding (rather than an argument where people stick to firmly held opinions, beliefs, etc.)
- What have we done to encourage people to express themselves in ways that are specific, passionate, authentic, true to themselves (rather than speaking in generalities, cliches, or kneejerk opinions?)
- What have we done to enable people to listen well and communicate to others that they have been heard?
- What did we do to enable people to empathize with one another?
- How did we get people to trust us and each other?
- How did we level the encounter (i.e., how did we enable people who may function in a hierarchical relationship – lawyers and support staff, police and youth, moms and daughters – to experience each other as equals)?
- How did we encourage people to reveal and respond to hidden assumptions or biases in ways that enhance rather than undermine the encounter?

In regard to any of the above:

- What tools and techniques have made these things possible?
- What underlying principles are functioning to encourage these outcomes?
- What non-verbal cues are we giving?
- What language choices are we making

documentary footage of the residency process, moments of discussion in the process, and interviews with participants. The facilitator posed specific questions to prompt responses.

- **Participation:** We also used participatory activities, such as reviewing the community dance developed in Eastport, or practicing a particular tool and then reflecting together about what had happened.

- **Inquiry:** Often the discussion simply proceeded from a question. At times discussions were dialogue-driven, as in, “What can you say about the role of the non-verbal in relation to dialogue?” At other times they ranged wider, in hopes of giving a bigger context for the discovery of dialogue: for instance, “Can you name dimensions of a Dance Exchange aesthetic?”

As conversations emerged, they took on the organic nature of true dialogue, with a shifting cast of participants (including various combinations of staff, artists, apprentices, understudies, and visitors) who brought varied levels of knowledge and experience to the session. Based on differences of perspective, the process enabled participants to share anecdotes, draw larger conclusions from the body of evidence, or both.

EXCAVATING THE SMALL UNITS OF PRACTICE IN PRINCIPLES, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

At the outset of the Audit, we were able to assert certain aspects of the relationship between Dance Exchange practice and the concepts of civic dialogue. At the most basic level, the Dialogue Audit confirmed some of these assertions, primarily because participation in Animating Democracy programming offered us dialogue theory and reference points.

These connections between dialogue theory and Dance Exchange practice frequently provided a means for organizing the examination of our tools, methods, and principles and recognizing their relevance to dialogue. In the following section, some of our discoveries and observations are thus organized according to some key principles from the world of dialogue.

Ask Questions

A culture of inquiry prevails in much of the Dance Exchange’s work. And questions and responses are generated through group interactions.

“Good questions outrank easy answers,” said economist Paul Samuelson. We highlighted the quote in *Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process*, a book that describes a technique of criticism in which artist and responders are called upon to form questions thoughtfully and to ask a question before stating an opinion. The same philosophy emerges frequently in other aspects of the Dance Exchange’s work: In a teaching situation, we are much less likely to dictate the significance of a practice than to ask participants “What did you observe?” Questions are often posed directly to the audience in the Dance Exchange’s stage work. For example, the question mark in the title of Liz Lerman’s 1992 work, *The Good Jew?* encapsulated the inquisitive, even inquisitorial, form of that piece, and a section of the Tucson *Hallelujah*, was built around the question, “How many stories are in a legend?”

Perhaps most pertinent to the practice of civic dialogue, Dance Exchange uses questioning as one of the central drivers for creating art through community engagement. Our past 10 years

can be charted according to the major artistic projects we developed and toured, and the core questions they posed. In *Safe House/Still Looking* (1993-95), we asked, “When have you felt unsafe?/When have you given help or shelter to someone else?” In *Shehechianu/the Sustenance Project*, we asked, “What sustains you in times of trouble?” And in *Hallelujah*, “What are you in praise of? What can we join together in praise of?” In each of these projects, and particularly in *Hallelujah* with its extended timeline and many sites, these core questions had many variants and offshoots, crafted to project themes, community interests and current events.

The art of the question

Because inquiry is a core value of the Dance Exchange, and because the question is a basic unit of dialogue and an important tool used by dialogue practitioners, we spent some time in the audit discussing what makes an effective question for advancing an artistic/community engagement process. (We often use the word “prompt” instead of “question,” as it encompasses methods for eliciting content from participants that go beyond the grammatically-defined form of a question, such as “Write a series of sentences, each starting with the words ‘I come from...’” or “talk about a time when you gave shelter to someone.”)

The evolution of *Hallelujah* can be tracked in the evolution of the questions we posed to our community collaborators. In order to distill the project down into an easily-grasped concept, we would often describe it as “Addressing the question ‘What are you in praise of?’” In fact, that was only one of the many questions we posed, such as:

- What is a little Hallelujah in your life?
- What do you miss and what do you wish for?
- When did you cross a boundary and who did you bring with you?
- When was a time when you met your beloved?
- When have you found beauty and disorder in the same moment?
- What do you remember about birth, death, or first love?
- What is paradise to you?
- What reminds you that you’re human?

In a Divulge session, we reviewed the above list and contrasted it with questions we had used in other community-based projects (for instance “What image captures the spirit of community?” or “What is the role of spirituality in your life?”) This exercise helped us clarify some Dance Exchange styles and values for forming questions, from which we drew the following principles:

- **Explore the range:** Start by thinking about the theme or issue you want to explore, in broad and specific terms and in concrete and metaphorical ways. For instance “How did you or your family come to be in Southeastern Michigan?” and “When was a time you crossed over into a new place?” might be two ways of approaching the same topic, each valid in its own way but likely to elicit different kinds of material.

- **Stay accessible:** Make your opening prompt “easy,” something that allows people to think of an immediate response. Make it “juicy,” likely to draw out an answer that is not only going to be interesting to the hearer, but exciting to relate. For instance, when we discovered that the question, “What

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are you in praise of?” was too broad for some responders, we revised it to “What is a little Hallelujah in your life?” This inspired responders to think more personally and feel free to name a small detail rather than a grand theme.

- **Start in a way that offers responders choices:** Strive for opening prompts that are non-threatening, that may introduce a controversial issue or a sensitive point of personal history without going directly to its heart. For instance in the current *Near/Far/In/Out*, a project engaging multiple generations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, we start with “How has your path been straight or curved?” This affords people the choice to respond in general or intimate terms, with reference to sexual identity or not. Only later do we move onto a question about the coming-out experience.
- **Get physical:** Consider questions that refer directly to the body and its mechanisms. Questions like “When was a time when you were out of breath?” or “When did your heart beat faster?” can be powerful because people connect to memory through the body, and are likely to express themselves in spontaneous gestures that become a fertile source for dance ideas.
- **Stay inclusive (within reason):** Think about how you can keep prompts inclusive of everyone. For instance, if you say “Write a postcard to a descendant,” you may exclude those who don’t have or expect to have direct descendants. The prompt might be better phrased “Write a postcard to someone who’ll come after you.” (Liz Lerman has expressed a caveat to this idea: Some of the work of feeling included may lie with the participant, and not rest entirely on the shoulders of the facilitator.)
- **Combine questions:** Think about questions that allow for a spectrum of response, the hopeful and affirming in addition to the painful and negative. This territory is sometimes best covered by a series of questions. *Safe House/Still Looking*, for example, asked paired questions: “When did you feel unsafe?” and “When did you give shelter to someone?” In *Hallelujah* we used the complementary questions, “What do you miss?” and “What do you wish for?” Often this prompt provided a chance to express both regret and hope about the same topic.

Throughout Hallelujah the ongoing dialogue in response to the questions had a reflexive effect on the questioning process itself, and the questions evolved in response to what we learned from the answers.

Throughout *Hallelujah* the ongoing dialogue in response to the questions had a reflexive effect on the questioning process itself, and the questions evolved in response to what we learned from the answers. For instance, in Minneapolis, after we settled on *In Praise of Beauty and Disorder* as the theme, we framed the question as

“When have you experienced beauty and disorder in the same moment?” We discovered that many people responded with memories of births, deaths, and first love. As a way to streamline the process and narrow the content, we reframed the question to address just those experiences: “What do you remember about birth, death, or first love?”

Form a Circle [or The Circle as Form]

“Participants form a circle” is a core practice related to dialogue. The circle is the basic shape of a Dance Exchange community encounter, the configuration that usually starts and ends workshops and rehearsals, and the recommended seating arrangement for the Critical Response Process. Because it runs contrary to certain conventions of learning and leadership in the dance field—for example, that dancers enter a room and face front to receive direction from the teacher or choreographer—forming a circle can still feel like a revolutionary act in such settings as university dance departments. But the circle is elemental in our earliest experiences of dance and is central to many world traditions of dance, something we learned anew through our dialogue with the Japanese Buddhist Bon Odori dance form in the Los Angeles *Hallelujah*.

A much-discussed videotape shot backstage at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, and shown at several audit events, shows community cast members interacting during the intermission of the first *Hallelujah* performance. They must ride an elevator from the greenroom area to the performance level. Eight or 10 people board the elevator and spontaneously form a circle. Someone points out what the group has done and all laugh. (As a society, we are definitely *not* conditioned to form a circle in an elevator, so it seems unlikely that anything other than three weeks of forming circles in rehearsal could have influenced these participants to alter their usual habit.)



Liz Lerman in *Hallelujah: Stones Will Float, Leaves Will Sink, Paths Will Cross* presented by the Skirball Cultural Center in February 2001.

Credit: SheShooters Photography.

At Animating Democracy sessions we learned how critical circles are in dialogue theory. Dialogue specialist Judy Sorum Brown, in several of her writings, recommends circular seating or a round table as an important structure for increasing a group’s capacity for dialogue. We also learned about circles in our *Hallelujah* encounters with people from differing cultures. After a community meeting early in the planning process for the Eastport *Hallelujah*, company member Martha Wittman approached members of the Pasamaquoddy tribe who had chosen not to sit at the rectangular tables. The tribe members explained, “You were seated at a square table. We don’t sit at square tables, we sit in circles.” As this suggests, the circle implies a relationship of peers with no one assuming a “head of the table” position, and all participants functioning as equals.

Daniel Yankelovich in *The Magic of Dialogue* stresses the value of any tool that levels an encounter when he writes, “Practitioners agree that in dialogue all participants must be treated as equals.” In observing the Dance Exchange, Sima Rabinowitz noted: “This [circling up] process is useful particularly in intergenerational groups, equalizing imbalances in power This is crucial for a successful collaboration but is often overlooked in many programs in which I have participated.”

Build Trust

Trust is critical to effective civic dialogue, and is frequently cited in dialogue literature. *The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, the foundation document for Animating Democracy, states, “Substantive and transformative dialogues are facilitated by deft guides who create a sense of trust, respect and safety.” Trust is also one of the qualities most often cited by community participants in Dance Exchange projects. As a *Shipyards Project* participant says in *The Artistic Imagination*, “The way Liz presents things you open up and trust. Liz says, ‘Come play,’ and you are participating.”

Trust is critical to effective civic dialogue...

We explored the question “How do we build trust?” in one of the Divulge sessions. The responses spanned a range of practice, from small building blocks of trust occurring in the moment, to strategies that unfold over the course of a residency:

- **Greeting:** We begin by walking into a room and shaking hands, even before a formal introduction. As noted by Minneapolis participant Sher Demeter in a video interview, “They went around the circle and shook hands with every single person. I thought, ‘That is really good. These people walk their talk.’”
- **Circles:** Having participants sit or stand in circles enhances trust and levels the encounter, as discussed above.

- **Blind Lead:** This is a core technique that the Dance Exchange uses to start many of its first encounters. As company member Elizabeth Johnson explains, “We build trust by having them close their eyes and lead each other around the room.”
- **Methodology of Questioning:** We don’t initiate a dialogue with the question that is most personal or issue-charged. Instead we may find a broader, more abstract or metaphorical way to phrase our opening question before moving to personal content.
- **Getting to Know People who are Community Liaisons:** We gradually build relationships with individuals who already hold the trust of the people we want to engage. Sometimes we may have five or six phone calls with a key liaison in a community before everyone agrees to a relationship. It can take time and effort, but once established, the relationship can transfer quickly to those who trust the liaison.
- **Going to Them Rather than Expecting Them to Come to Us:** We meet sub-communities on their turf before asking them to engage with a wider group of participants. As Liz Lerman put it, “If you want to talk to the fishermen in Eastport, meet them at the Diner, that’s where they gather.”

These are ways to set a good foundation for working together, to sequence experiences in ways that are most likely to keep people engaged, and to make our jobs easier. Trust is never a mere byproduct; it is an organic part of the process.

Level the Encounter

Another question posed by the Dialogue Lens is “How did we level the encounter?” (i.e., how did we enable people who may function in a hierarchical relationship—lawyers and support staff, police and youth, moms and daughters, clergy and congregations—to experience each other as equals?) As we’ve already noted, the assertion of equality among participants is a central precept of dialogue. As Daniel Yankelovich states in *The Magic of Dialogue*: “Dialogue becomes possible only after trust has been built and the higher-ranking people have, for the occasion, removed their badges of authority and are participating as true equals.”

The Dance Exchange levels its encounters in a variety of ways. As noted the circle formation is a critical tool, and again, usually near the start of an encounter, Blind Lead comes into play. In addition to building trust, this tool (which is described in the following section on principles, tools, and techniques) offers people the opportunity to assume and switch roles of leader and follower. The effect is often revelatory when people in traditional leader-follower relationships find themselves playing unfamiliar roles.

As a project continues into its choreographic phase, another way that we level an encounter is through collaborative work that assigns equal roles to people who might be perceived as having different status. This succeeds to the degree with which participants embrace the assignment. Some participants seem to welcome the possibility of shedding their status. Reverend Masao Kodani of Senshin Buddhist Temple was a prominent presence in the Los Angeles *Hallelujah*. The choreography called upon him to be touched frequently, and at one point to be simultaneously embraced by three people. Dance Exchange company members working with Reverend Mas (as he was called) gave little thought to this. Then word emerged from members of his congregation who were also in the cast that, out of deference to his status, Reverend Mas was never to be touched. There was even a rumor that several members of his congregation attended the performance “just for the opportunity to see Rev. Mas being touched.”

Robin Wilson of the University of Michigan dance faculty joined the cast of the Michigan *Hallelujah* along with approximately 20 students in the department. While not uncritical of the Dance Exchange and some of its methods, she was invested in what she could learn through the experience and participated as an equal with students in choreographic assignments. By contrast, a faculty member from the University of North Carolina immediately assumed the role of sole choreographer when given a collaborative assignment and ultimately dropped out of the performances because “she didn’t have enough to do.”

However, the negation of hierarchies is not an absolute. To assure quality in the artistic outcome, there is a chain of command with Liz, or another lead choreographer, at the top, since some degree of leadership—the power to sequence, edit and re-synthesize the work of others—is necessary. And often in the *Hallelujah* projects there was a group or groups of participants who might be accorded special status (not required to be at all rehearsals, for instance, or offered special aids for remembering movement). Often these people—the “Reverends and Rabbis” in the Los Angeles *Hallelujah*, the “Card Girls” in Vermont, the veteran Paradise Valley show dancers (two women in their 80’s) in Michigan—provided a frame or a special point of reference for the piece.

BLIND LEAD AND ONE TO TEN AS TOOLS THAT SUPPORT TRUST AND LEVELING

Blind Lead, one of the Dance Exchange's most frequently-used tools, can be introduced at the launch of a long collaboration or in a one-time encounter. In Blind Lead, the leader instructs the group to form pairs. In each pair one person closes his eyes while the other leads him around the room. Participants then switch roles. We then develop the structure by giving participants the option of changing roles and partners. Blind Lead is done without speaking, but during the exercise the facilitator will stop the activity at least twice and ask the group to share their observations and insights.

We use Blind Lead very early in an encounter, to introduce ourselves to a group and to acquaint group members with one another. Blind Lead participants are not consciously working toward a concrete outcome such as generating artistic content or making a dance. Rather they are engaged in a process with two distinct *but simultaneous* aspects: having the experience, and discovering for themselves what that experience means, individually and as a group.

From the start, participants are engaged in a variety of social acts: approaching or being approached by a partner; choosing a partner with whom they are comfortable; choosing the role they will play to start; knowing that they have a choice between assuming and surrendering control.

In the multiple rounds of spoken reflection during the exercise, participants talk about their heightened awareness of people, describing sensations from a non-verbal level of experience, thrown into relief by the limited access to visual and spoken communication. They may cite perceptions of shape, height, body temperature, firmness, smells, moistness or dryness of a hand-clasp, directness or hesitancy in how they are being guided. In such observations, participants become aware of differences, but not along the social or ideological lines that we usually think of when we broach the question of diversity. People are perceiving "different differences".

Participants also gain perceptions about themselves based on their choices to lead, to follow, or to relish the opportunity to switch off in those roles. Often these discoveries confound their expectations.

Usually by the final debrief on the experience the group has revealed its own issues or sense of common identity based on the collective reaction to Blind Lead. Social workers might perceive the exercise to be about the nature of helping and guiding; in faith-based settings participants may interpret the exercise as prayerful, mirroring a relationship with God; dancers make discoveries about partnering and group kinetics.

In addition to building trust or leveling hierarchies, Blind Lead illuminates dialogue at multiple levels: between the experience and the spoken reflection about that experience; in the non-verbal, multi-sensory relationship between shifting pairs of partners that occurs in the exercise itself; and during the conversation about the meaning of the experience, both personally and communally. Liz Lerman, who learned the structure from choreographer Cathy Paine, has noted: "Blind Lead can be said to level hierarchy for a few minutes, but it does give people new ways of looking things. It offers a chance to experience things on a horizontal spectrum and discover something to respect at the other end of the spectrum. If you're a leader, Blind Lead give you a way to respect what a follower has to do, and a follower can discover what it takes to be a leader. ...It just expands people's repertoires."

As a way of engaging people in the act of making a dance and in understanding what it means to make a dance, One to Ten may be the Dance Exchange's most profound tool. Pairs of participants take turns assuming shapes in relation to one another, calling out the numbers from one to 10 as they go. The leader asks participants to experiment with the movements they make between poses, to widen the distance between one another, and to cease calling out the numbers so that they must watch for nonverbal cues. Participants are reminded "You must take a position in relation to your partner, and remember that anything you do will be in relation to your partner."

In movement terms, One to Ten offers an obvious parallel to a spoken dialogue between two people. One person makes a statement, the other responds, and that back-and-forth pattern is repeated. But we also find deeper dialogue implications in One to Ten. As each movement response is informed by the one before it, actions are generally spontaneous and unplanned because the exercise is relational. As the exercise opens out and the leader directs participants not to call out the numbers as they go, the mutual observation between the partners intensifies in a way that parallels thoughtful listening in a spoken dialogue. It offers the potential for people to learn how to "listen" deeply, for you succeed to the degree that you comprehend what your partner has expressed and understand when your partner knows you've finished. By virtue of its mostly non-verbal approach, One to Ten isn't likely to constitute civic dialogue in itself, but the skills it builds for listening and spontaneous response can clearly translate over to verbal dialogue, and potentially to civic dialogue.

For more information about these exercises, see the [Blind Lead](#) and [One to Ten](#) Appendices.

IDENTIFYING SOME POINTS OF THEORY

In the *Hallelujah* residencies, we observed the functions of dialogue in the smallest through the largest units of the Dance Exchange approach. In addition, the Dialogue Audit excavated some points of theory that cut across our practice.

Big Story/Little Story and Frame It Bigger

Pretend my body is a map of Israel... Here's Haifa where Solomon sent and received his ships... And here. Right between my esophagus and my trachea, here is the West Bank. This is where Abraham entered Canaan. And here. This is the spot where Jesus was born... [And here, my heart, is Jerusalem]... My friend Rachel said "Liz don't, ...don't make your heart a metaphor for Jerusalem. Jerusalem is too divided, too explosive, too split. It will mean you have a broken heart. And I said, "Rachel, it is impossible to be 50 and not have a broken heart."

—Liz Lerman's "Body Map"
from *Fifty Modest Reflections on Turning Fifty* (1998)

These brief excerpts illustrate an aesthetic principle Liz calls "big story/little story"—finding the connections (often unexpected) between personal story and the stories of history, collective lore, or world events. Making the connection completes a circle: Autobiographical material is set in a bigger context that enables an audience to perceive the larger significance in personal experience, while momentous ideas and awesome events are made concrete by connection to one person's life. The connections are not always logical, linear, or direct, and such tools as metaphor, juxtaposition, and fragmentation give "big story/little story" depth and subtlety.

Related to the concept of "big story/little story" is a Dance Exchange axiom: "Frame it bigger." Liz often uses this phrase when advising people how to intervene in a conflict or address discontentment or discomfort. It means drawing attention to the larger situation, context, or structure. Company member Elizabeth Johnson related an artistic application of "framing bigger" during one of the Divulges:

"In Mississippi we had participants who wanted to bring Jesus references into the performance. Even though we didn't want to make that the message of the performance, we wondered if there was a way it could be a part, without crowding out other people's perspectives. I remember a Build-a-Phrase with a little girl who said that Jesus was a light she wanted to bring into the lives of others. I had to find a way to expand out from [that kind of evangelism] in a way that wouldn't shut anyone down. I said "can everybody think of a way they let light in?" We have those moments all the time where we're put in difficult situations and have to find a way to balloon it out."

Several principles of effective dialogue are embedded in the related ideas of "big story/little story" and "frame it bigger." Both are devices for understanding the experience of the individual in the context of a larger issue. With "big story/little story," in particular, people find specificity and authentic detail in expressing their own stories. The "little story" is the "I statement" that dialogue practitioners urge participants to use instead of making large generalizations or absolute proclamations. In the context of dialogue, the idea of "framing it bigger" can create a point of reference that allows divergent viewpoints to co-exist. Both concepts address the first of Judy

Sorum Brown's *Norms on Dialogue*: "Speak from the heart and the moment and from your own experience; listen from the community, from the collective."

Non-Verbal Dialogue

As the only dance company selected for the first round of Animating Democracy lab projects, we heard a number of comments to the effect of: "It will be interesting to see what you discover about the role of non-verbal communication in dialogue." In our audit activities, we made a point to visit this possibility several times.

The idea of non-verbal exchange came up in interviews with participants who asserted that a kind of movement language or gestural vocabulary came to be shared among the community performers in a project. Dance Exchange company members noted the central role that the *Build-a-Phrase* tool played in unfolding and sustaining the individual *Hallelujah* projects. In this core technique, the artists at a community site ask for responses to particular prompts ("What is paradise to you?"). Then by using their choreographic skills—watching for spontaneous gestures, giving the group quick movement assignments, or offering a single motion to represent several ideas—company members assemble a series of movements drawn from the circle into an eight or twelve count phrase that serves as a composite of the stories shared. Everyone dances it several times, first with the leader reminding the group of the various sources of the movements, then with music, and then perhaps with some text that may or may not be related to the stories shared.

... We heard a number of comments to the effect of: "It will be interesting to see what you discover about the role of non-verbal communication in dialogue."

At a later point in the process (as happened in Detroit/Ann Arbor) the two groups that build and share phrases at a distance, through the agency of the Dance Exchange, finally convene to collaborate. At their first live encounter they already share a body of movement and spoken lore that forms one of the foundations of their work together and the performance they will help create. This is the material that participants sometimes describe as a "movement language."

Peter DiMuro, Dance Exchange's Artistic Director, says, "It seems that once you have this gestural language established, you're creating a culture that helps to define the community [i.e., the group of participants that has formed to collaborate on the project]. Then it links from site to site, Hawaii to Massachusetts, as more people learn the same material."

The power of *Build-a-Phrase* to link individuals and communities is somewhat dependent on spoken language to convey some of the stories when the movement is passed on. Nonetheless, the possibility that one gesture might have multiple meanings suggests a power for movement that transcends the limitations of conventional language.

Those considering the non-verbal power of dance from an audience perspective are primarily thinking about the expressive power of movement. And non-verbal communication in social situations often refers to gestural cueing or unconscious body language. But touch is also an important form of non-verbal communication in participatory dance. Elizabeth Johnson summed this up eloquently:

There's a different communication that happens when people are in physical contact with each other. When we do something like *Blind Lead*, we help people recognize the non verbal by asking for observations, "how did you know that your partner felt safe or resistant?" A lot of the [choreographic] material we make entails information concerning weight and touch. We [dancers] take a lot of that for granted. As movers we

are used to touch and communicating that way. Most of the world only touches when they're on the Metro and are squished up against other people.

Dialogue as Theatrical Device, Metaphor, or Concept

Throughout the Dialogue Audit, the word “dialogue” arose frequently. As some of the above attests, we were often talking about approaches that legitimately parallel aspects of dialogue methodology. Sometimes we were clearly discussing civic or democratic realms. At other times we were using the term “dialogue” as a theatrical device, a metaphor, or concept. In those moments it was sometimes unclear whether the statements had any relevance to the civic experience or to dialogue as a social practice. A few comments from participants in the “Divulges”:

“As the Dance Exchange combines text and movement, we aren’t illustrating the text with the movement or making a literal translation. It’s more like the words and movement are in conversation.”

“Considering that we are doing a theatrical form that uses the spoken word, it’s interesting how rarely we actually perform dialogue in the usual theatrical definition of two characters talking to each other. Much more often we put two or three figures on stage and have them juxtapose or layer their stories. The stories resonate and bounce off of each other.”

“In the site-specific work, we leave the dance open to the juxtapositions that can happen in the moment. The viewer’s perception is not of a dance plunked down in a space but an entire wide view that is partly the dance, partly what is happening in the environment, and the connections between these two elements. You can’t always tell where one ends and the other begins, as if the dance were in a kind of dialogue with the environment.”

There is something satisfying about making these statements. They do seem to suggest that dialogue is the essence of the Dance Exchange’s work, and that the Dance Exchange inspires a kind of dialogic experience in the mind of the audience member who does part of the job of fitting together the elements of text, movement, and environment, or who contemplates the way that multiple stories inform or contradict each other. But you also might ask if the act of placing the lens of a dialogue audit on our work has induced us to see dialogue everywhere. Are we simply choosing the word “dialogue” to describe any kind of dynamic relationship between elements? Or is dialogue, as Martin Buber suggests, simply an innate quality and function of any worthwhile art?

Are we simply choosing the word “dialogue” to describe any kind of dynamic relationship between elements? Or is dialogue... simply an innate quality and function of any worthwhile art?

FITTING THE UNITS TOGETHER: A DANCE EXCHANGE WORKSHOP

The tools, techniques and principles discussed in the preceding sections are the smallest units that engender and support dialogue at the Dance Exchange. When we start linking these units in a series, they lead to the next larger unit of dialogue: a full encounter. This might be an initial meeting with community members, a rehearsal to develop content, or a teaching situation where the goal is to impart information and give people access to tools. Though the shapes, settings,

and intents are varied, these larger groupings often have similar structures in relation to harnessing/supporting dialogue. For the sake of simplicity we'll refer to all of these structures as workshops.

During the Dialogue Divulges, we took some time to analyze how a workshop unfolds. We laid out the “typical” activities or elements and sequencing of a workshop and discovered that we can track the effects of these activities in three areas:

- **Artistic:** How does the activity advance the art-making?
- **Dialogic:** How does the activity advance values conducive to dialogue? And, what kind of dialogue is taking place in the activity?
- **Civic:** How does the activity build community?

Workshop groups often develop a sense of identity and community as they collaborate to build a bigger artistic outcome. Each activity has a role in enhancing civic or community values.

“The Dialogue: How Workshop Unfolds” (Figure 1) names each step in a typical workshop along with its effects. The horizontal rows demonstrate how the artistic, dialogic, and civic effects are interrelated; the vertical columns suggest the rationale of the sequencing and its cumulative effect in each of the categories.

At the **artistic level**, activities start with a statement of purpose and then move to a warm-up for bodies and minds that prepares them for artistic activities. The artistic activities provide opportunities to exercise individual skills before engaging in collaborative skills. At the same time, the **dialogue level** advances through a series of incremental building blocks beginning with the simplest form—one leader to one participant—then expanding as participants take turns responding to a question or prompt. Additional dialogue skills are then introduced as participants experiment with various forms of non-verbal or freeform interaction. This leads to more complex forms of dialogue focused on group exchange or problem-solving, and closes with reflection and consolidation facilitated by the leader but ultimately the product of a group interaction.

Meanwhile, at the **civic level**, the quality of the engagement deepens incrementally. The process starts by gathering a group of people (they can be strangers, well acquainted, or a combination), then nurturing a safe and challenging environment in which participants can reveal differences and commonalities. Through tasks that put negotiation, consensus and group action into play, the group becomes a community of purpose focused on the artistic outcome. The same act can have different meanings depending on whether it is seen as having artistic, dialogic or civic intent, and three distinct but parallel trajectories can be mapped. (See the Workshop Trajectories chart in Figure 2.)

CUMULATIVE DIALOGUE: THE MICHIGAN RESIDENCY

Can the idea of civic dialogue be mapped through the course of the largest unit of Dance Exchange practice, a full-scale residency project that engages a community in the creation of a choreographic work? We believe that dialogue weaves through the process of a major residency in organic ways related to the subject of the work, to the particulars of the participants, and to events occurring in the wider world beyond the project. At the same time a decided trajectory of dialogue can be mapped in the creation of an artistic work that reflects and incorporates a community of participants.

One such project, the September/October 2001 *Hallelujah* hosted by the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, Michigan, illustrates some of the forms this may take.

FIGURE I

The Dialogue:

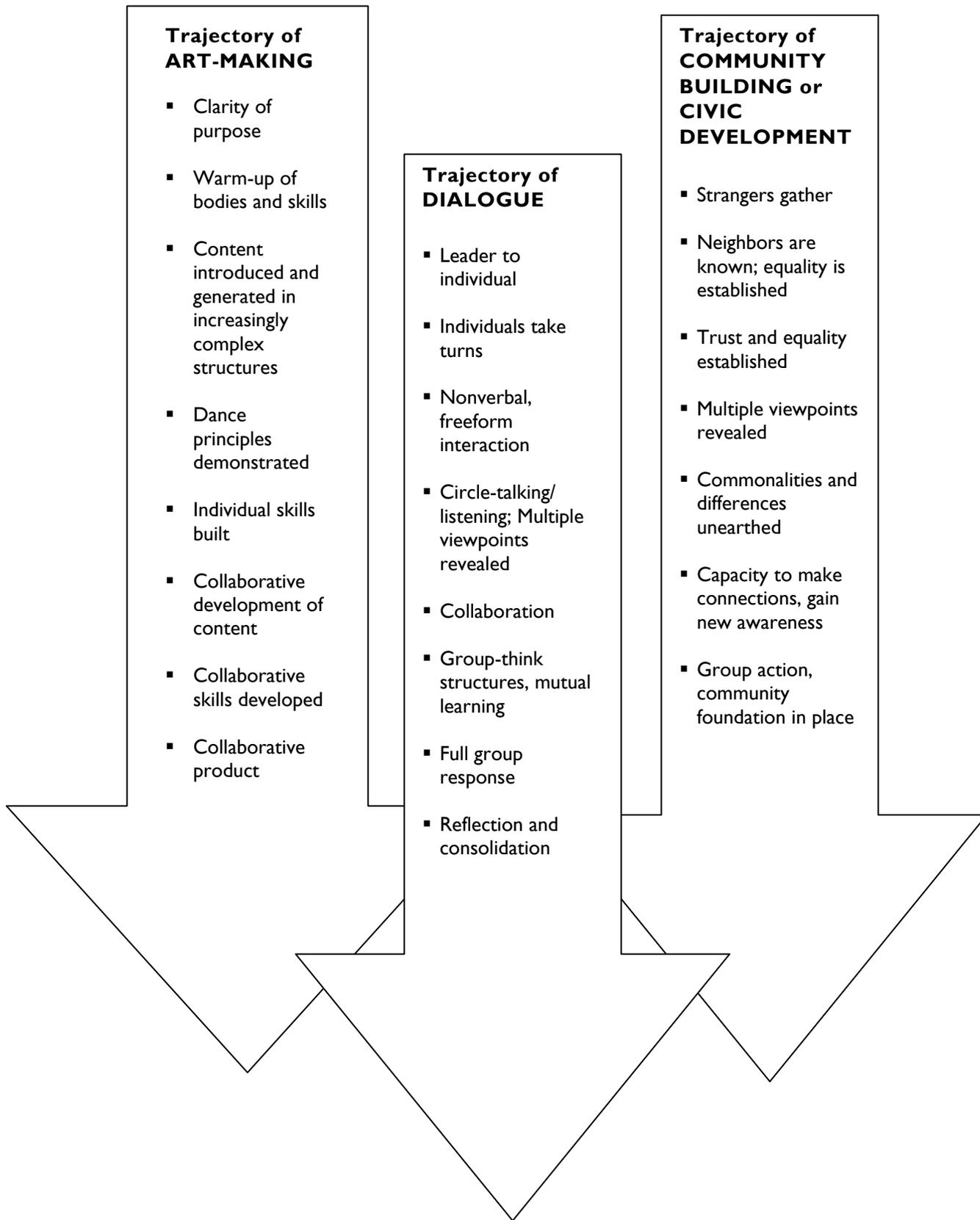
How a Dance Exchange Workshop develops artistically, dialogically and civically

	ACTIVITY	ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT	DIALOGIC DEVELOPMENT	COMMUNITY BUILDING OR CIVIC DEVELOPMENT
First steps	Leaders circulate and greet participants, learn names and engage in one-on-one conversations.	Promotes participant comfort and removes first barriers to artistic process.	Establishes ease between leader and participant.	Promotes basic community building value: know your neighbors. Begins to break down certain expectations about hierarchy. Promotes the value of each individual in the group.
	Leaders collect and respect observations and opinions.	Individual contributions are appreciated to encourage later communication.	Opinions are voiced and heard without judgment being expressed. Multiple viewpoints are revealed.	Establishes a community of multiple viewpoints.
Warm-up	Introductions (stand in a circle and state name, where you are from, what brought you there, or variation). Participants invited to take charge of their own bodies and what to share. Given the option of <i>not</i> participating.	Introduces gesture. Places people in command of themselves.	Establishes the expectation of a conversation. Respect accorded, trust expressed to each participant. Everyone gets a turn.	Renders power, control, and choice to each participant. Each participant takes responsibility for own actions.

	ACTIVITY	ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT	DIALOGIC DEVELOPMENT	COMMUNITY BUILDING OR CIVIC DEVELOPMENT
Core program	Blind Lead (exercise often used as a warm-up).	Uses skills for moving and introduces partnering that will be used later.	Partners are interacting in one-to-one encounters while still aware of group dynamic. Listening” skills expanded beyond the sense of hearing. Heightens multi-sensory awareness of fellow participants. Gives opportunity to exchange perspectives and reflect on meaning.	Trust is established. Leader/follower roles are practiced and switched, often leveling differences in status.
	Topic or “commonality” focused question posed in story circle formation.	Content, text, and stories are explored for movement and symbol.	Full group sharing and discussion takes place. Personal statements, “I” statements are valued. Deeper personal viewpoints are revealed.	Breaks out of insular experience. Values the personal in the social context (“The personal is political.”)
	Break out of circle. Participants circulate, having a series of one-on-one conversations with different partners.	Introduces more movement possibilities. Collaborations are deepened.	Engage with different partners on a one to one basis. Recognize a range of ideas.	Emphasizes the value of individuals in the group. Affords mutual learning,
	Choreographic assignment	Ensemble building, content and skill development, editing, performance values established.	Sharing, mutual teaching, problem solving takes place. Negotiation; management of agreements and disagreements.	Group becomes a community of purpose.

	ACTIVITY	ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT	DIALOGIC DEVELOPMENT	COMMUNITY BUILDING OR CIVIC DEVELOPMENT
	Involves generating ideas, sharing, synthesizing, and showing; usually moves between solo, pair, and small group work, ultimately with a showing made to the full gathering.)			
Reflection	Observations of the experience are collected throughout the workshop and cumulatively at the end.	Consolidates skills, content and performance values.	Opportunities to stop the course and reflect and observe as a group are offered.	Participants enjoy appreciation of varied and shared experiences. Confirm group achievement.

FIGURE 2
Workshop Trajectories



Laying the Groundwork

The Michigan *Hallelujah* developed in stages. A preliminary visit to the campus of the University of Michigan in fall 1999 afforded Liz Lerman a chance to meet with potential campus and community partners. We employed distinctive dialogue components even at this early stage: On the first visit, as we began working with campus and community representatives on finding a theme for their *Hallelujah*, Liz used a story-circle format prompted by the questions “What do you miss and what do you wish for?” (As mentioned in “Art of the Question,” this question draws out people to discuss aspects of the places where they live in vital and personal terms.)

A year later the entire company returned for a *Still Crossing* residency. In *Still Crossing*, a dance originally created for the 1986 Statue of Liberty Centennial, community participants are encouraged to gather in small groups with people they don’t know and discuss their family histories related to immigration or migration. The artistic purpose is to help performers connect to movement based on ideas of crossing and transition, as symbolized by the Statue of Liberty, but the question of how our ancestors came to be in this country or why they settled in a particular region generally gets at some larger issues. The *Still Crossing* rehearsal process also calls on participants to pair off for mutual coaching, and when the participation crosses generational lines and engages people with widely varying levels of dance training and stage experience, as it did in Detroit, this coaching process cultivates skills for critique and collaboration.

The *Still Crossing* residency engaged participants in both Detroit and Ann Arbor, thus initiating a number of the partnerships that would be central to the full *Hallelujah* project in September and October of 2001. As was typical in the large-scale *Hallelujah* projects, several visits by smaller teams of Dance Exchange artists paved the way to those partnerships. The conscious decision to bring participants together from the disparate environments of Ann Arbor and Detroit would not simply bridge the geographical gap of 40 miles that separates the two cities. It also was intended to overcome a variety of perceptual barriers about privilege and poverty, academic and industrial economies, ivory-tower isolation and urban blight. Some participants, like Detroit-raised students now attending the university in Ann Arbor, were well-versed in crossing these boundaries; others, from both cities, would be making the physical and figurative trip for the first time. As these dynamics emerged in the lead-up to the final residency, we had tentatively titled the planned work “In Praise of Boundaries Kept and Crossed.” (And although this title would change, the theme itself continued to play out.)

The Community Residency

By the start of the final four-week residency period we had established several partnerships that would be central to the project, chief among them the collaboration with gospel music composer, arranger, and choir director Dr. Rudy Hawkins and his Detroit-based chorus. In discussions with Dr. Hawkins during planning visits we arrived at the theme of this *Hallelujah*: “In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found,” inspired by the history of Paradise Valley, an African American neighborhood and entertainment district that was flattened in the 1960s by highway construction between Detroit’s downtown and the suburbs. This story was to parallel John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, telling the story of Lucifer’s fall from heaven and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden.

Dance majors from the UM dance department would share the stage with liturgical dancers based in Detroit, and that factor, combined with the orientations of the two chief collaborators (Liz Lerman as post-modernist and Rudy Hawkins as gospel practitioner), suggested differences

not only in aesthetics and technique but in convictions about the very purposes of art. Moreover, with the destruction of Paradise Valley as the subject of the work, we would have some substantial civic content for the dialogues. And the plan to juxtapose events in Detroit that had occurred within living memory with the religious/epic/mythic story of the fall from Eden meant that interplay between stories would develop inside the choreographed work.

The final residency started on September 10. The history-changing events of the following day would throw everything into a new context and ultimately add an entirely new layer of civic content to the project. These developments were described in an essay by John Borstel for the documentary project implemented by UM's Arts of Citizenship program:

When Liz Lerman first conceived of *Hallelujah*...she described ... the idea that the celebration would not deny the inequities, injustices, or sufferings of human existence. Rather [the project] would channel the human need for celebration in spite of or in counteraction to these circumstances... *Hallelujah* would be "like the party after you've come through a hard time." ... [or] "a multi-dimensional artistic expression combining celebration, praise, and recognition of hard times endured.

When we used this language, I always assumed we were referring to past history. I don't think any of us particularly anticipated that *Hallelujah* might accompany us into such a period of tribulation as that which commenced on September 11. ... [Sustaining] the spirit of celebration in the piece while still offering a meaningful observation of the 9/11 attacks was the ultimate challenge of *Hallelujah's* founding concept."

On the morning of September 11, Liz and a small team of company artists were at a community site, Hannan House, a community center for senior adults in Detroit. The team first heard the news from a radio that was playing in the lobby. Though we questioned whether participants would be interested in taking a workshop under such circumstances, several people arrived, eager to go ahead, and so we did. Liz introduced the workshop with words to this effect: "When something like this happens, you will always remember where you were when you got the news. This is where I want to be. I'm grateful to be here with you right now and to be working together."

Over the next couple of days, we were taking the first steps to building the choreographic content of the Michigan *Hallelujah*. At each workshop the company offered ways for people to channel the thoughts and feeling they were experiencing in the aftermath of the attack. In one case, participants shared large sheets of paper on which they simply wrote the questions that were in their minds. These questions were later read as a text to accompany movement developed during the workshop... in the coming weeks, people often cited the workshops for how they helped them get through their concerns and anxieties (some were college students separated from their families for the first time), or served as a refuge during a difficult period.

Within a day of the attacks anyone on the UM campus could observe a variety of responses to the question of what action the U.S. should take, as flag-waving mingled with demonstrations against the prospect of military intervention in the Middle East. But in the workshops we chose not to directly address this particular controversy. Focusing on questions as the only required response in a time of confusion and shaken faith was clearly comforting for many participants, and writing meant allowed people to express ideas that might be literally "unspeakable" at that point. Writing afforded an outlet, allowed differing viewpoints to be revealed without setting them into an antagonistic framework, and generated energy and artistic content that would be harnessed in the project itself. While it did not directly engage people in a civic dialogue about September 11 and how our country or our leaders should respond to this crisis, our project

activities offered a way for participants to share emotions and thoughts in public. We created a civic space, a public place for personal thoughts.

While all this was happening, the Dance Exchange team was having a series of dialogues with our chief collaborators and our presenter to determine how the events of September 11 might be reflected in the project. It was difficult to anticipate what the emotional climate would be a month later when the project took the stage, and we discussed a range of options: cancel the performance altogether; change the performance from the celebratory spirit of *Hallelujah* to something in a more memorial vein; or stay with the original plan but incorporate observance and reflection on the events of 9/11 in the performance. Since participants were already addressing the events of 9/11 and its aftermath in the workshops, and because the “Paradise Lost and Found” theme was apt, ultimately we settled on this last option.

While all this was happening, the Dance Exchange team was having a series of dialogues with our chief collaborators and our presenter to determine how the events of September 11 might be reflected in the project.

Liz and the leadership of UMS agreed to gather a group of faith leaders from several different religions and denominations, who would appear on stage during the first half of the concert. “In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found” was presented in the second half. These faith leaders would offer thoughts and teachings that had been helpful to them in the aftermath of the terrorist incident, and this would be the basis of a Build-a-Phrase interaction with the audience, in which they would help create a dance. UMS President Ken Fischer assumed the task of identifying and recruiting these faith leaders as a kind of personal mission, and Liz agreed to make personal visits to each of them in order to prepare them for a performance that would essentially be impossible to rehearse.

As we continued to move forward in developing the Paradise Valley and Paradise Lost plotlines, music, and choreography, we began to encounter some of the differences of culture, aesthetics and faith that our collaboration with Rudy Hawkins and his group would entail. Liz Lerman discussed these in an article for the *Hallelujah/USA* companion book:

... As soon as we were rehearsing, I asked Rudy to write a song in which Adam and Eve would fight over what to take in their suitcases when they are banished from the Garden. At that suggestion, several of the singers looked at me in dismayed exasperation and said “What suitcases? What argument? They messed up and they have to leave. Period.” This led us to an insightful, invigorating conversation about biblical interpretation, a conversation that also underscored ideas about artistic interpretation as well. It was the first of many deep encounters that our two groups would have over religion and art, one where I was particularly struck by how close faith values and aesthetic values can be.

The dialogue about the collaboration between the Dance Exchange and the Rudy Hawkins forces was broached at a critical juncture, with members of both groups participating. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, the participants sat in a circle and spoke in very personal terms about their connections to faith and artistry, and how they saw them linked. They expressed religious viewpoints or candidly acknowledged their secular orientations. Everyone reaffirmed the desire to work together and learn from the experience. It seemed a positive contribution to what was ultimately a positive collaboration in which all parties—while holding their own turf in many senses—found common ground and lots of opportunities to blur their aesthetic boundaries.

Exposed to a litmus test for civic dialogue, the encounter might have been subject to some questions. Was it a limitation that it was instigated by Liz Lerman, who largely served as both a

key stakeholder and as facilitator? Did the cultural norms of the Dance Exchange rather than those of the Hawkins group dictate the dialogue, or did it spring from some neutral position between the two? And did the circle include everyone who could shed light on the sense of conflicting values?

While theme, community, and unexpected events exerted their power on the project, the principles of Dance Exchange business-as-usual provided welcome grounding.

The community dimension of the project moved forward. While theme, community, and unexpected events exerted their power on the project, the principles of Dance Exchange business-as-usual provided welcome grounding.

As at other sites, we initiated the process by encountering the various project subgroups at locations they considered to be home space, or at least familiar. In Michigan, the initial week focused on workshops and developmental rehearsals with discrete groups. We began work with students in the UMS dance department and with an “all come” group that gathered people from throughout the campus and the Ann Arbor community. In Detroit, we had home turf workshops with the Liturgical Dance Collective, dance students from Marygrove College, seniors at Hannan House, and students from Wanans Academy for the Performing Arts.

Rehearsals at this early stage have a multifaceted agenda: To introduce our tools; to begin generating choreographic content and experiment with thematic ideas; to build ensemble values; to teach and practice predetermined aspects of the choreography; to allow us to get to know the participants, their strengths and the degree of performance and other responsibility they might be capable of carrying. Aspects of dialogue are evident in every aspect of this multidimensional agenda, but usually dialogue facilitates a goal rather than serving as a goal in itself.

By the second weekend of the residency we had begun drawing together multiple groups, though we were still maintaining separate foci in Ann Arbor and Detroit. On a Saturday halfway through the residency, we finally drew the entire cast together at Marygrove College in Detroit. At this rehearsal, in a fashion very typical for Dance Exchange, several sub-rehearsals took place simultaneously for most of the afternoon, and the cast was configuring and reconfiguring in a variety of ways: participants were still in their subgroups of origin, rehearsing material that they had already developed; two “cameo” performers, women in their 80s who had been nightclub dancers in Paradise Valley during its heyday, were introduced into the project; Dance Exchange members and choir soloists continued to refine material; participants rehearsed choreography that they had learned on their own turf, but now alongside people they were encountering for the first time who had learned the material at their home sites; participants watched other groups perform material that they had developed; and everyone gathered in a circle to learn names and hear about where the groups had come from.

The primary agenda at this point in the process is artistic: half-way through the residency we “flip the funnel”—that is, make a transition from freewheeling experimentation and development of potential material to the process of refining and condensing the actual content of the performance. So even as the casting/personnel configuration is evolving, so are the functions of the gatherings.

During the concluding weeks of a residency, dialogue as an overt activity facilitated by Dance Exchange artists receives less emphasis, and the final content assumes more importance. Participants themselves carry on dialogue as they work together in ongoing small group rehearsals.

The Performance

On the night of the performance on October 6, 2001, the two key threads of the project came together: one a direct and overt reaction to September 11, and the other more oblique, layered, and poetic.

In the first half of the concert, nine faith leaders offered thoughts and teachings that had been helpful to them in the aftermath of the terrorist incident. A Buddhist teacher cited the story of one of the Buddha's incarnations as a ruthless pirate to suggest that even the terrorists are worthy of compassion; an African American Methodist minister reminded us that our sense of safety is relative, stating that African Americans have never really felt safe. These faith leaders appeared on stage when Liz and Artistic Director Peter DiMuro taught a dance for the audience to perform at their seats. In the style of Build-A-Phrase the movements of the dance were linked to the comments and stories of the faith leaders.

The new work combined the threads of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Valley*. At the end of the work, "In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found," after a celebratory dance including almost all of the 80 community cast members, company member Martha Wittman tells a final story. In her gentle voice, she says, "It's not a story I like to remember as it does bring sadness with it, but sometimes memory is helpful in times of trouble," and goes on to describe the events of September 11 as if from the distant past, speaking of a beautiful fall day and planes striking a city's two tallest buildings. At this point the cast masses tightly on one side of the stage and begins slowly to perform the dance taught to the audience in the first half of the performance. In this moment, the audience witnesses on stage the very dance that they felt in their bodies an hour before. The performance ends with the cast slowly leaving the stage one by one as Rudy Hawkins himself sings the words "heaven, heaven," from the spiritual, "All God's Children Got Shoes."

While the faith leaders did not directly engage in a public exchange of ideas, the nature of their presentation could be viewed as a dialogue of ideas. At a time when political rhetoric and media commentary were dichotomizing the implications of September 11—good vs. evil, security vs. vulnerability—the faith leaders expressed a spectrum of reactions and created an experience in which everyone present might partake. Everyone was offered several different possibilities for perceiving and understanding an incident that often seemed incomprehensible—possibilities that could co-exist in one room, one moment, one person's experience.



A moment from *Hallelujah: In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found*, presented by the University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, Michigan, October 2001. Credit: Courtesy University Musical Society.

There was also a relationship between the two halves of the program that suggested a dialogue between differing perceptions about the themes of the evening. To have "In Praise of Paradise Lost and Found" end with the very dance created earlier that evening, now performed by the cast on stage rather than the audience, and to have the audience become beholders of what they had helped to make, was the completion of a rich dialogic circle between stage and audience, documentary and mythic events, words and movements, action and witness.

The Response

Reactions to the evening were wide-ranging. Critic Tara Zahra, writing for the website Dance Insider, interpreted the contribution of the faith leaders and the invitation for the audience to participate as the simplification and reduction of a complex situation, creating therapy through art and coercing patriotic unity through participation. (This was in spite of the fact that none of the speakers mentioned nationalist sentiments, and that in leading the participatory moment Liz clearly offered members of the audience the option of not participating.) She wrote:

There is a difference between representing forms of spirituality or religious themes on stage and asking the audience to participate in these stories, to embrace them as a therapeutic balm for deeply political wounds... there was no one on stage to represent non-religious ways of understanding or coping with the September 11 attacks... by offering only religion, the “invocation” universalized and depoliticized the profoundly political moment we find ourselves in. [To opt out seemed] an act of treason... a forbidden expression of cynicism, a failure to grieve.

Zahra’s review contained no mention of the second half of the performance.

On the other hand, Linda Burnham, writing for API Online/Community Arts Network, had a decidedly different perspective (informed, it should be noted, by long observation of the *Hallelujah* process in addition to attendance at the Michigan performance). She emphasized the ultimate complexity of the performance’s layered message and its rejection of simple answers:

“Postmodernism is the ... demonstration that all our answers are simply constructs, that there is no truth, there are only versions of it ... That is why Liz Lerman’s inclusion of organized religion in her patently postmodernist work is so interesting. If modern art is the Answer, then postmodern art is the never-ending Question. [This work’s] power resides in its illustration of the passionate human search for an answer that will never come, for a Paradise we will never find. As each person on the stage dances his or her own search, they are united in the struggle, beautiful in its tragedy.”

Neither Zahra nor Burnham directly refers to dialogue as a concept. But Zahra’s words suggest that she found the performance to be quite the opposite of dialogue, bordering on propaganda, while Burnham’s article perceives the dialogue values of multi-partiality and the free flow of meaning to be deeply embedded in the postmodern aesthetic demonstrated in the Michigan *Hallelujah*.

The audience reaction, captured in a survey by the Arts of Citizenship, offered another layer of response. When asked what the performance was about, many respondents named such values as unity, crossing boundaries, the power of the collective, “celebrating difference and appreciating commonalities.” People perceived the performance to be about a harmonious vision of community, reflecting diversity and difference, but not particularly a manifestation of dialogue. Those choosing to reflect on the audience participation were uniformly positive in their comments.

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If we agree that the primary community engaged in the dialogue dimensions of a *Hallelujah* project was the one that formed to create the performance, we might consider this community’s response to the experience. Aspects of this response were captured in a group reflection exercise that took place between the dress rehearsal and performance on the final day of the rehearsal. While no one addressed the idea of dialogue directly, many clearly

addressed the project's effects in building connections within and between groups. Responses to the question, "What was a highlight of this experience?" included:

"The excitement of the first Saturday Detroit rehearsal when everyone came together for the first time. Everyone worked really hard despite the chaos and the groups worked really well together."

"All different parts and groups come together and integrate toward the end. Coming from different backgrounds, coming together. Meeting people from different places."

One response suggested that the artistic content becomes a shared language or a common ground for the participants:

"The fact that every movement has meaning to somebody here and isn't just a random step. Makes the performance much more interesting and meaningful."

Still other comments pointed to some of the specific dialogue-related techniques or the principles of the Critical Response Process. In response to the question "What have we learned?" they said:

"Try to take something special from each person involved."

"How to affirm other(s) and show they are appreciated."

"Being observant of people when they tell their stories: use of gestures."

The Arts of Citizenship essay offers another perspective on community building and dialogue, as reflected in the idea of crossing boundaries:

...At our *Hallelujah* in Tucson, I'd noted how there was limited mixing among some of the groups, particularly those like the gospel choir and mariachi band that constituted their own ensembles. These groups tended to keep to themselves when socializing backstage or on the sidelines. When I mentioned this to Peter DiMuro as I anticipated how the various groups from Detroit and Ann Arbor would interact, he said: "If we mix them up on stage they will mix backstage." This simple axiom proved true in Michigan, as participants were definitely challenged to collaborate on stage. ...At the same time there were moments when boundaries were kept, a kind of sacred space and time observed for a group's own solidarity: the Rudy Hawkins Singers would gather together in Dr. Hawkins' dressing room, partly for warm-up, but partly for what seemed to be a kind of "professor's house" salon, and Penny Godboldo would also gather her liturgical dancers for their own warm-up.

Was the *Hallelujah* residency at UMS intended to generate civic dialogue? And did it do so?

Ben Johnson, Director of Education/Audience Development for the University Musical Society, says, I'm not sure that we had 'expectations' about civic dialogue in this project, but it certainly evolved at times. Civic issues raised by the work and by the Detroit/Ann Arbor dichotomy included race, geography, and ownership over real and perceived personal boundaries."

IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS

The core Dialogue Audit helped to inculcate a company culture in which everyone became more aware of the theory underlying the practice, more conscious of how to repeat the approaches

that had been effective in the past, and more thoughtful about the dialogue and civic dimensions of the Dance Exchange's work. (The phrase "dialogue moment" entered our vocabulary as a way of highlighting significant encounters for their dialogue content). While it's difficult to document a strict a cause-and-effect relationship, the internal dialogue we conducted through these activities surely enhanced the quality of the artistic, collaborative, and community work during *Hallelujah* by affording us chances for reflection and mutual learning during this very active period. Further, as we advanced the transition from Liz-as-sole-visionary to an institution of multiple artistic voices led by multiple artistic directors, these activities were invaluable in giving company artists fuller ownership of our techniques and identifying what values, aesthetics, practices, and philosophies can be identified with the institution, not just with its founder.

Artistic Impact

The Dialogue Audit made us more self-aware in ways that had an impact on the artistic product. We observed the language we used with community participants and the dynamics of our artist-to-artist collaborations to a greater degree. This had two primary manifestations:

We refined our techniques for assuring quality in community collaborations. This was largely a process of engaging people in the conversation about what was useful and powerful as a component of the final art work, and why, and of using dialogue and participation to support a kind of civic engagement within the context of the project so that participants became invested in the value of the whole. By observing and practicing dialogue we were able to make the art better.

In the work that Liz did as part of *Hallelujah* with artistic colleagues—people not part of the Dance Exchange whom she might consider as her artistic peers—Liz paid close attention to the dynamics of her collaborative dialogue, particularly as it broached cultural and aesthetic differences. She has stated that what she learned from the first dialogue allowed her to make a more fruitful collaboration in the second. Much of it was about what to make transparent in terms of intent and assumption, what to allow action, rather than words, to resolve, how to frame differences bigger, and where to compromise.

In the future, we foresee a stronger role for predefined social issues in Dance Exchange work, and more potential for civic dialogues in the commonly-understood meaning of the term. Liz's choreographic project on the human genome—currently in early development and slated for culmination in 2005-08—will directly address some of the stimulating, curious, frightening implications of genetic research related to social and ethical issues. Moreover it will include a component of public programming likely to incorporate public dialogue, sometimes launched from an experiential/movement/participatory experience, sometimes in response to the performance or a presentation by collaborating artist/scientist teams. Peter DiMuro's *Near/Far/In/Out*, a performance project partly framed as an intergenerational dialogue among gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, is unfolding, somewhat like *Hallelujah*, as one in which the bulk of the civic dialogue is happening among the participants. But even given the specific nature of the populations engaged, there has been dialogue—between transgendered and gay/lesbian people about their differences and commonalities, and between the generations.

Having published a book describing the Critical Response Process we are interested in deepening our research into its applications and ramifications, including those related to its social significance. We are still curious to advance our exploration into questions related to the wider dialogue applications of the process.

CRITICAL RESPONSE DEVELOPMENT

Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process (CRP) is a multi-step dialogue process for an artist to solicit feedback about artistic works-in-progress, and to take control of the dialogue about the work, rather than simply being the subject of critical assessment. Dance Exchange and Animating Democracy discussed the need to do research on the uses of the CRP, and issue an up-to-date publication representing current best practice. Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: a method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert, was released in spring 2003. We usually emphasize that the Critical Response Process is a means of having a civil dialogue about artistic work as opposed to being a tool for an issue-focused civic dialogue. Nonetheless, our examination of the Process in the context of our work with ADI prompted reflection about the social relevance and deeper civic potential of the Process. As a result we expect that the next wave of activity focused on the CRP and its dissemination will seek the answer to such questions as: Does the Process need to be adjusted or augmented when the responders are stakeholders in the art (for instance, in the case of sculpture occupying a public space)? Should the protocol for expressing opinions be different if the artwork under consideration expressed views with which some responders are in strong disagreement? When a diverse group gathers for dialogue in the Process, how is the dynamic of the conversation affected by factors like differing educational backgrounds, cultural economic privilege, or command of the language in which the Process is conducted? What challenges do these disparities present for effective and inclusive facilitation?

The Civic Realm

Civic? Dialogue? Civic Dialogue? The audit process involved some persistent puzzling over the distinction between the terms “dialogue” and “civic dialogue.” As we reviewed our work, we often questioned when we were enacting dialogue that wasn't civic, when we were engaged civically but not having dialogue, and when were we doing both at once. Gradually we came to worry less about whether anything was pure civic dialogue and to simply pay more attention to the intersections of these ideas. What we discovered through this little struggle over terminology was that the civic and the dialogic are both happening constantly in our work and overlapping sometimes. But there was no way to pull out pure civic dialogue and understand it in isolation from the other manifestations of dialogue and civic interaction. In isolation, the concept of “civic dialogue” always felt like a loose thread that needed to be woven back into body of work and our body of knowledge in order to have meaning.

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At the outset of the project, the idea of civic dialogue of which we were most conscious was based on the commonly known forms of public conversation: town hall meetings, open invitation dialogues about issues, and the like. Though Animating Democracy was open to our different concept of “dialogue,” we couldn't avoid considering those forms at least as a point of comparison. We often asked ourselves how what we were doing was like or unlike those forms? When did an interaction qualify as a community interaction? What made something public? We came to recognize that anytime we were gathering people and asking them to commit to a process, we were aligning a new community. Even the core company working by itself in the studio constitutes its own community. The project became a matter more of observing varied layers of dialogue than of creating a scorecard for what qualified as civic dialogue or public conversation.

Having a working definition of civic dialogue within the Dance Exchange’s practice leads us to the question of how we distinguish civic dialogue from other forms of communication in our work. There is certainly a mode of communication in our work that isn’t about dialogue or the democratic. It’s about an artist making distinctions, judgments and decisions and conveying those choices so that they can be put into effect by the rest of the team. It is the autocratic end of the spectrum, and we certainly sharpened our thinking about it during the audit as we examined the editorial process and the idea of artistic direction in which one individual would assume the final say. It might seem that the civic, democratic, and dialogue-rich points are happening early in the process when there’s a lot of free response, open sharing, and give and take among the participants, and that it moves toward the more autocratic and less dialogic toward the end when the artistic leadership clamps down and determines the final form of the work. During one of the Divulges, company member Margot Greenlee viewed that moment as a shift in the dynamics of dialogue:

“I wonder if the issue of dialogue can be looked at like this: A moment in the process that is really hard for participants is when we start editing. And in a sense, that’s a moment when dialogue stops. On one level the give-and-take ceases and the artistic stakes take over; the bounds between person and artmaking are redefined. Early on the interests of the individual are given a lot of weight, but as editing takes over the art is given more weight.”

It is debatable whether “dialogue stops,” as Margot states, but her comment does point to some of the complex dynamics between the artistic, the civic, the dialogic, and the democratic. Early on, the artists do function more as facilitators; the community and the creative processes call on them to value and acknowledge all opinions and encourage an environment that’s conducive to the co-existence of many viewpoints. But at the same time these very elements help to set the foundation for an outcome where distinctly civic values prevail: Where regardless of whose voices are ultimately reflected, everyone is invested in the outcome; where participants are willing to empower someone else to speak for them; where each person in the project is willing to share a stage with someone whose viewpoint may be different from their own; where individuals are willing to sacrifice their own movement, story or moment in the spotlight to endorse the collective voice of the piece. The values of dialogue may prevail at the start of the process; the values of civitas may prevail at the end of the process. If you examine any one moment you may decide that either dialogue or the civic values prevail in that moment. But, we

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would contend as a result of our Dialogue Audit experience, if you look at the experience in the aggregate you would be observing an experience of civic import.

The work itself often explores ideas of particular interest to the community from which the work springs. Although not overtly discussed by the audience, these ideas are frequently addressed by participants in the process, and in press coverage of the residency and performance. In Vermont, for example, the issue of the state’s then-new legislation allowing civil unions for same-sex couples was an integral part of “In Praise of Constancy in the Midst of Change.”

Institutional Impact

Prior to the project, we thought of dialogue as one of many manifestations of our work. Its status has probably changed little in the overall scheme of our process and products. What has

changed is that dialogue is now an idea we reference constantly within the staff and ensemble, and in our conversations with the outside world.

Broadening the Frame of Reference

The audit has deepened our ability to interpret, analyze, and explain our work to our own fields, including the dance field, the community arts field, and the presenting/performing world. But more importantly, it has helped us to sit at the other tables with more force and presence because we are secure in a key point of reference that transcends dance or even art. So we have new ways of illuminating our own work when we talk to scientists, historians, politicians, or university administrators.

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In the case of Liz's new choreographic project on the human genome—slated for culmination in 2005-08—we are thinking of a dance-based project as a way to broaden the conversation about the impact and implications of genetic research beyond the scientists, reporters, and legislators who have primarily participated so far. What would it mean, Liz has been asking, to bring scientists into a room with welfare mothers, urban teens, or hip-hop poets, and how could the synergy between the unique knowledge of artists and scientists serve as a catalyst for a conversation that has not yet happened?

Because the dialogue audit involved analysis by the staff and company at an unprecedented level, it increased everyone's ability to have these conversations—not just Liz. At a point when we are really focusing on “decentralizing the genius” and cultivating multiple artistic voices, the influence of the audit has been very timely.

The audit heightened our consciousness of how we use dialogue to collaborate with artists outside the company, ranging from primary artistic collaborators to the local dance professionals who served as “ambassadors” (local coordinators) with community based groups for our *Hallelujah* in Minneapolis. The audit took us to a new level in how we handle the dialogue with artists outside the company, extending and deepening the possibilities for such collaborations.

The Audit deepened our thinking about the ways that we teach and pass on the methods of the Dance Exchange within the company. Up until now, the Dance Exchange— typical of much of the dance world— advanced and imparted its methodology through what is basically an oral tradition of teaching, sharing information, maintaining repertory, and passing on stories about what we did and how we did it. Part of the goal of the Dialogue Audit was to move us more toward a written tradition in which our methods are written down, disseminated in definitive versions, and backed up with documentary evidence. For our purposes, the oral tradition has meant that the methodology is malleable, non-proscriptive, adaptable to myriad situations, and able to be owned and advanced



The finale of *Hallelujah/USA* the culminating performance series in the *Hallelujah* Project. Presented by The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at Maryland in August 2002, it gathered over 100 participants from the 15 national *Hallelujah* sites. Credit: Stan Barouh.

by many people acting communally. But oral tradition has had its disadvantages: newcomers required long periods of initiation, Dance Exchange techniques, when practiced by artists from beyond the company, could be implemented poorly but still credited to us, and people were largely reliant on first hand encounters to get the benefits of our work, which limited our ability to maintain sustainable impact. Written tradition has its attendant set of advantages and disadvantages: it threatens to codify our approach, to freeze the evolution of our methods and inhibit artists into practicing the methods as if there were only one right way. One of the revelations of the Dialogue Audit so far has been that the solution to advancing our work and its dialogue components lies not in forsaking the oral tradition for a written tradition, but in finding a way to act and advance in both traditions, taking what is beneficial from both.

In the most fundamental way, there is a deep civic implication to those founding questions of the Dance Exchange: Who gets to dance? Where is it happening? What is it about? As we move to the future we are looking at those questions not just in relation to dance, but also in relation to dialogue and civic engagement.

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