

Bringing Private Conversations to Public Spaces

By Arthur H. Wolf

Whether the dialogue is about civics, literacy, or citizenship, it is time. Civic (and civil) dialogue is increasingly called for in a nation that does not acknowledge the existence of economic and social classes, mostly avoids discussions of race and is experiencing the environmental and economic effects of its dependence on a single source of energy.

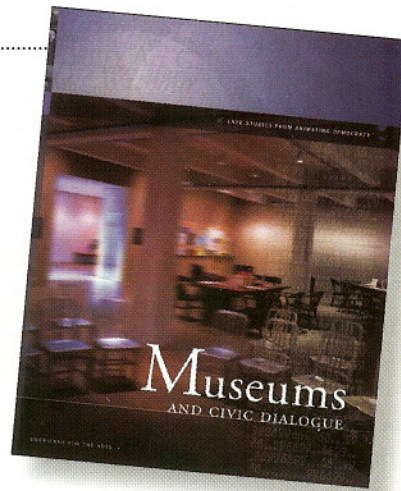
As museum folk, we need the courage to invite important conversations into our institutions and invite our communities inside to participate. Museums are given great authority by the public, recognized as safe, open places, places that contain knowledge to be discovered and provide a comforting gravitas that allows for personal exploration and learning. When museums accept that authority and facilitate not just the setting and the forum but also the topics for the dialogue, both communities and museums can obtain powerful results.

Museums and Civic Dialogue, edited by Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon with an introduction by Ron Chew, presents the stories of three very different kinds of museums—all participants in Americans for the Arts' Animating Democracy program, which fosters civic engagement and dialogue through arts and culture. The book explains how these museums conceived their projects, involved collaborators and planned exhibits and programs that engaged their communities. Through these projects, participants explored historical themes such as the nature of evil and the confrontation of

racism as well as such future concerns as genetic engineering. Case studies like these are important because they allow us to contemplate from the sidelines what it was like to risk such controversial exhibitions. Our own organizations can then use these examples to stimulate vital dialogues.

In the first case study Lynn E. Stern describes the process and outcomes for dialogue about the exhibit "Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics" at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. The exhibit featured more than 50 artists whose work looked at potential future impacts of current genomic research efforts. The use of visual metaphors as a point of entry and the contrast of fine art and hard science allowed the Henry to develop multiple formats for encouraging public dialogue relating to economic, moral and ethical concerns about scientific work. The result was a heightened public awareness of genetic engineering and the creation of new ways to engage the public in the discussion.

Jeanne Pearlman presents the second study from the Jewish Museum in New York, which developed the exhibit "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art" as a "springboard for dialogue about the complicity and complacency towards evil in today's society." In the exhibit 13 artists explored the nature of evil not from the usual perspective of the victims of the Holocaust but from that of the Nazi perpetrators. After intense project design that involved many advisors and collaborators and controversy before the exhibit even opened, the goal of "promoting dialogue rather than shutting it down" was



Museums and Civic Dialogue: Case Studies from Animating Democracy. Pam Korza and Barbara Schaffer Bacon, eds. Washington, D.C.: Americans for the Arts, 2005. 84 pp., paper. \$20.

achieved in a depth of expression that changed staff, artists and dialogue participants, according to Pearlman.

The final case study as related by Jessica Gogan of the Andy Warhol Museum in Philadelphia considers the "Museum as Artist" through the hosting of "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America." By providing and encouraging daily dialogues, interpretive displays, multiple feedback opportunities for visitors, artist projects and programs, the museum and its many partners "unburied" a sensitive and relatively unknown history of violent racism as shown in more than 100 pictures and postcards of public hangings, mostly of black men. The rich dialogue, depth of audience response and community engagement touched all who participated. A second exhibit, "Andy Warhol's Electric Chairs: Reflecting on Capital Punishment in America," had similar public responses, but a fundamental difference was evidenced in the difficulties that polarized advocacy groups had in embracing the dialogue format versus their political positions on this currently controversial subject.

Readers of these case studies will be impressed with the careful and thoughtful way that all three museums approached

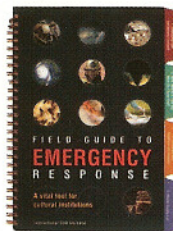
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their complex and even controversial topics, engaged stakeholders in broadly inclusive and respectful ways, planned for multiple layers of public engagement, analyzed the outcomes and raised questions about the nature of civic dialogue itself. While all three of these studies relate to art museums it is not hard to imagine the rich potential for museums of history, science and natural history to invite their communities in for conversations on other topics of local, national or worldwide importance.

Museums and Civic Dialogue confirms that there are risks, but also many rewards, in the commitment to the encouragement of civic dialogue in museums. Thanks to the authors and Americans for the Arts for showcasing what can happen when we come together from our solitary musings to talk, and listen, to one another. ■

bookshelf

Field Guide to Emergency Response.

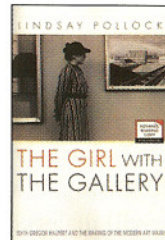


By Heritage Preservation. Washington, D.C.: Heritage Preservation, 2006. 58 pp., paper with DVD, \$29.95. With Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel, \$34.95.

The Heritage Health Index found that 80 percent of cultural institutions lack an emergency plan with staff trained to carry it out (see "This is Not a Test" on p. 42). The *Field Guide* distills the expertise of conservation professionals who have responded to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. It includes a DVD on salvage techniques (e.g., for mud, mold and soot), checklists such as a disaster supplies shopping list and information panels that can be customized ("Now, Where Is That?" lists locations for everything from first-aid kits to alarm codes and insurance policies). The separate Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel is a slide chart

providing salvage advice for collections.

The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market.



By Lindsay Pollock. New York: Public Affairs Books, 2006. 464 pp., paper, \$30.

In an era when American artists lacked the respect of their European counterparts and women were not expected to pursue careers, Edith Gregor Halpert burst onto the fledgling New York gallery scene, defying societal rules. In 1926, at the age of 26, she opened one of the first art galleries in Greenwich Village. The Downtown Gallery, which she ran for 44 years, laid the groundwork for the art market's modern era and its methods of aggressive promotion and sales tactics. Halpert, a penniless Jewish immigrant, cultivated the most illustrious art collectors, invented the market

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