

Martha McCoy

Art for Democracy's Sake

People may find it a stretch to think of the connection between art and democratic life. Yet in ancient Greece, the connection was taken for granted. Tragic drama as a public art form was thought to be central to the development of virtuous citizens and healthy debate. Today, there are democratic theorists and cultural analysts who are examining the links between art and democracy and the possibility of true civic dialogue. And there are many artists who are acting on this connection.

Public art and the concept of civic dialogue are thus very much alike in receiving expectant attention. As yet, though, both public art and civic dialogue are far from universally understood, appreciated, or practiced. They are related to each other, and they need one another to achieve their respective aims. This article uses performance art as an example, although the principles could inform any kind of public art.

Defining Civic Dialogue

In its most general definition, civic dialogue is a face-to-face discussion among community members on matters of common concern and social/political importance. But to paint a more vivid picture, civic dialogue is an expressive give-and-take at the heart of a vision of participatory democracy. It is a key part of the answer to the most important questions being asked about our public life: If we were to have an active and democratic public life, one worth getting engaged in, what would it look like, and how would we create it?

There is some excellent theoretical writing on civic dialogue, but one of the most compelling real-life portrayals of it came out of Los Angeles in 1992. Not long after

violence erupted after four policemen were acquitted in the beating of Rodney King, the National Civic League convened focus groups among people from all ethnic groups and walks of life. In these groups, people talked about what could have prevented the violence and the civic discord that had just taken place.

Across the board, Angelenos expressed the need for safe, neutral settings where they could have genuine dialogue with people from other ethnic backgrounds. They talked about the need for those settings to be an accessible, ongoing part of community life—places where diverse groups of everyday people could honestly express their stories and concerns; listen to others; form interracial relationships; discuss community issues; work with each other to make a difference on those issues; and make their voices heard by public officials and other community leaders.

In describing what they wanted for their city, they created a dynamic vision of what every community needs. If such opportunities—democratic discussions where everyone has a voice—were to exist throughout a community, they would form the core of a participatory, collaborative public life that is worth getting engaged in.

Creating A Democratic Vision

There are two primary ways in which public art can play a role in creating this vision of a democratic community. First, art can help create the conditions that are conducive to productive civic dialogue. Second, public artists can be active participants in creating real, face-to-face opportunities for civic discussion. Within each of these roles, there are a multitude of expressive and creative possibilities being tried, which deserve attention and study for the lessons they offer.

Art can validate and uphold the diversity of personal experiences and voices that make up a community.

Widespread engagement in civic dialogue depends on a commitment from the community as a whole to value everyone's voice. Public art can help support and even generate that kind of commitment by honestly and respectfully depicting a wide range of people's experiences. Each of us can recount our own personal experiences (in great detail); but it's only when we listen to others' experiences, put them on a par with our own, and see the community as the totality of those experiences that we begin to understand why we should sit down with one another and converse about our community life.

Jerry Yoshitomi, who chaired the Multicultural Arts Working Group of the 2000 partnership in Los Angeles, has often noted the power of public art to name and validate the many stories that exist in a community. He cites three simultaneous art exhibits in Los Angeles—an exhibition of nineteenth-century kimonos, a show on contemporary Japanese graphic design, and a mid-career retrospective of Carmen Lomas Garza.

“Most would assume that the two Japanese exhibits would be closest to my own Japanese-American cultural experience. However, the kimono exhibition represents the clothing of the aristocracy and the elite merchant class of nineteenth-century Japan. My family left Japan in that century to escape their own desperate poverty. While the contemporary design exhibition relates directly to my own aesthetic, contemporary Tokyo is in fact a twenty-first-century-world experience, frankly not comparable to my rather humble Japanese-American upbringing, and extremely distant from my parents’

experience in the American concentration camps,” he says. “In fact, it is in Carmen Lomas Garza’s recreation of her own family experiences and growing up that I personally have the most comfort with. The prints and paintings reflect neighbors in my own communities and symbols which were part of my life as a young child. As Americans, our cultural backgrounds often cross racial, religious, and many geographic lines.”

Yoshitomi also challenges us to think of the last time we were in a publicly supported cultural facility in our own city and to remember the images and symbols that were on the walls or the stages. “Do those images and symbols and plays and musical sounds represent the diversity of your city? Remember the audiences and those who were attending the opening night gala. Do those audiences represent the diversity of your city? These are questions we must ask.”

Art can help us experience others’ experiences.

As we partake of artistic events or exhibits or artworks—a play, a film, or a novel—we enter a parallel world in which we often have powerful vicarious experiences. These can move us to empathize with people who are different from ourselves, the basis of the fellow-feeling that is critical to a good public life, and an essential ingredient of civic dialogue. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum says that “Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling.” Her remarks can apply to any work of art.

Empathy, often seen as an internal state, does not remain inside us. It has concrete results in our actions and in our collective life. One such effect might be expressed in this way: “I don’t necessarily agree with you, but now I can imagine why you think and act the way you do. In spite of our differences, I know we’re part of the same community. I’m willing to search for our common concerns, and find ways to work with you to make a better community.” Sometimes a practical result of empathy is a new lens for viewing or understanding a public issue.

Art can help us to consider points of view we might not otherwise consider. Some art is mostly a reflection of the cultural and political mainstream, but the most controversial and important role of cutting-edge art is to raise unpopular or less commonly held points of view; that is frequently an explicit aim of public art. Art that raises viewpoints for inclusion in public debate can support a vibrant cultural, social, and political atmosphere that is essential to meaningful civic discussion.

The effectiveness of raising alternative views for the purposes of supporting civic dialogue is frequently related to an artwork’s capacity to generate empathy. After all, when do we become willing to truly “try on” a different point of view, instead of instantly rejecting it? Usually when we can somehow put ourselves in the place of the person whose life experiences and feelings have led them to hold that view. Art has the capacity to do that. This observation is key to the work of Anna Deavere Smith, a performance artist and playwright who interviews a wide diversity of people in a community, then portrays them—almost becomes them—on stage. When an audience experiences her performance, they enter—through her—into a sense of what it would be like to be each person. Speaking about *Twilight*, a piece she created to mirror the

diversity of voices in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, she says, “Few people speak a language about race that is not their own. If more of us could actually speak from another point of view, like speaking another language, we could accelerate the flow of ideas.”

When public art gives people a chance to participate in creating the art, it also gives people a sense of the participatory nature of public life.

Through participating in artistic processes, people are empowered to create and to experience themselves as inherently “artistic,” generative people. When the art itself is tied to public issues, the democratization of the artistic process contains even more potential. It reinforces a basic tenet of democracy, that everyone is capable of sharing in the deliberate shaping of their common life. That is why art of this kind quite naturally leads to public action.

An example of this took place in California, where a theater program helped bridge the racial, cultural, and economic gaps between elite Stanford University and the adjoining town of East Palo Alto. Using a research-to-performance method, city leaders and residents worked with Stanford faculty and students to create two one-act plays. The co-creation of the plays generated friction, dialogue, and finally a more inclusive sense of the area’s history. There were many spin-offs, including collaboration outside the theater to address common concerns in the community. One could well imagine this kind of theater tying into an effort to spur community-wide civic dialogue on pressing public issues the play raises.

Art can portray the many voices and views of a community, in kind of dry run of civic dialogue—which is different from art’s capacity to raise a voice or a point of view,

as essential as that is. Some public art portrays many different voices or views within one performance, in effect modeling the many voices in an inclusive civic dialogue.

Again we turn to Anna Deavere Smith. In *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* and in *Fires in the Mirror* (the latter on the Crown Heights riot of 1991), Deavere Smith portrays, one by one, many people from many backgrounds, each relating his or her own experience of a pivotal event from the community. In this way the audience can gain a more complete sense of the entire community and the voices that make it up. A natural next step—which has been taken—is to have a dialogue among audience members. To go beyond that, it would be natural to use the performance as a model for civic dialogue that could be taken outside the theater in sustained, ongoing ways throughout the entire community. Videos of the performance might be used to provide similar experiences in small-group discussions, bringing the theater to the neighborhoods, instead of expecting that everyone will come to the theater.

Another example involved the Flint Youth Theater production of *The 7th Dream* which was based on anonymous writings about violence by ninth graders in the Flint, Michigan area. The playwright William P. Ward used these writings to form six scenes in which young actors delivered first-person accounts of the violent acts area young people had witnessed or committed. This quickly gave the audience a more complete picture of the violence facing the young people of the community.

Art can launch and generate real, face-to-face opportunities for civic discussion.

Art can draw people into a public space. If it is accessible, affordable, and reflective of the diversity of the community, it can draw many people. Once people are in

the room, the artistic experience generates new understanding, energy, and a sense of community that can be directly tapped and extended through face-to-face dialogue at the event.

There are a large number of public art projects that have incorporated dialogue about issues as a part of their artistic whole. In *The Beast: The Domestic Violence Project* (1996), the performance group Dance Umbrella used a performance on the theme of domestic violence as a vehicle to stimulate audience discussions, in many settings and with great effect for those who took part.

A more experimental, and potentially far-reaching, role of art is to use it to stimulate and galvanize sustained, community-wide civic dialogue. One experiment along these lines is a new study circle guide and discussion-starter video, developed in conjunction with a film commissioned by the National Endowment for the Humanities. *TALK TO ME: Americans in Conversation* was created by Arcadia Pictures' Andrea Simon. The film was conceived as a mixed-form documentary, a collage, at once dreamlike and jagged, that attempts to give the sense of being in multifaceted conversation. The guide, *Toward a More Perfection Union in an Age of Diversity*, is designed to help communities organize sustained civic dialogue. The discussion-starter video has already been used at a community cultural event on Maryland's Eastern shore to launch community-wide dialogue on diversity. All the capacities of public art for creating the conditions of civic dialogue also make it a potential force for launching and enriching sustained democratic discussion.

Civic dialogue, in turn, can inspire and support public art.

There is a cycle in which art and civic life can expand together in mutually beneficial ways. Each will change the other, as they continue to grow and touch more people. In the last several months alone, we have seen civic dialogue generate new works of art—paintings, plays, poetry, dance—as well as new community arts collaborations for creating and performing public art (music, dance, theater). In Lima, Ohio, the community-wide study circles played a large part in bringing Maya Angelou to speak at their city-wide diversity celebration. Angelou tied her moving performance of poetry and storytelling to a salute to the community for its interracial civic dialogue.

The “arts world” is rarely mentioned in the world of civic engagement. That can and should change. The “arts person” is as narrow and false a conception as is the civic person. Public artists are gaining more experiences in creating the conditions that help nurture and sustain civic dialogue. Organizers of civic dialogue are finding ways to engage large numbers of community members in sustained democratic discussion. We need to find one another—across the nation and in our communities—and work together in more intentional ways. That will weave a lustrous community fabric and bring innumerable benefits to our public life.

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