

A Threshold Moment: Summary and Reflections from A Gathering of Animating Democracy's Critical Perspectives Writers

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In November 2002, a meeting of the Critical Perspectives writers and invited guests was held at the Tides Foundation in San Francisco. The intent of the meeting was to give writers an opportunity to share challenges and questions they were encountering in the process of writing about Animating Democracy projects, and more broadly, to discuss issues related to writing about civically engaged art. Animating Democracy Program Associate, Andrea Assaf, documents and draws out key discussions and areas of inquiry that emerged from the meeting.

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

I. INTRODUCTION	2
What is Critical Perspectives?	
The San Francisco Meeting	
Intent of this Paper	
II. THREE PROJECTS, NINE WRITERS	3
Dell' Arte International	
St. Augustine's Church / Lower East Side Tenement Museum	
Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA)	
Guests and Staff	
III. THE ROLE OF THE WRITER: CRITIC, COLLABORATOR, WITNESS OR ADVOCATE?.....	5
Point of Entry: Encounter with Process and Product	
Insider, Outsider, Expert?	
The Question of Collaboration	
Usefulness, Language and Audience	
Assessment: Failure vs. Risk	
IV. SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN ARTS-BASED CIVIC DIALOGUE	10
Relationship between Art and Dialogue	
Representation, Authority, Reconciliation	
Framing	
Aesthetics and the Limits of Genre	
V. THE CIVIC LOCATION OF THE WORK.....	13
Rationality, Exclusion and the Public Sphere	
VI. CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS/FINAL REFLECTIONS.....	14

I. INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES?

The driving question of Critical Perspectives is, what is the best way (or multiple ways) to write about civically engaged art projects? Existing forms of reflective and critical writing rarely recognize the unique features of civically engaged art and are often inadequate for communicating its multidimensional nature.ⁱ To begin with, there's a lack of writing about it and venues for publishing such writing. Internal documentation of art projects often only include the testimony of participants as "how it felt to be part of the project," without really empowering them to have authority as critical voices, and without including outside perspectives. At the same time, criticism is usually an external critique from professional art or theory disciplines, often not including any inside perspective, such as impact on community participants or artist's statements of intent or process. The complexity of civically engaged art projects suggests the value of multiple perspectives by multiple writers rather than a single authority paradigm.

Critical Perspectives is an Animating Democracyⁱⁱ effort that recognizes the inter-related nature of artistic form, content, context and process in civically engaged work. Animating Democracy is seeking a dialogic relationship in which participants, artists and community members are all empowered voices of reflection and critique, and are all considered necessary to understanding the meaning and impact of the whole. Because art-based civic dialogue intersects with different civic spheres such as justice, education, the environment, immigration, and urban/regional planning, writing is understood as needing to explore these contexts and intersections.ⁱⁱⁱ Key questions of writing about civically engaged art projects include: the politics of representation, and who gets to tell the story; how to write about process as well as product; and how to include and engage multiple voices or points of view. Critical Perspectives is not only interested in critical and reflective writing, but was designed to commission writing that might be "useful"^{iv} to cultural organizations, artists, activists, civic leaders and more, with the intention of getting the work out to multiple audiences.

Critical Perspectives acknowledges many forms of authority and knowledge, reflecting a democratic rather than a hierarchical approach to understanding and analysis.^v It aims to do so by engaging teams of writers coming from a variety of backgrounds and positions in relation to the projects—including artists, scholars, community participants, theorists and critics—to focus on three of the thirty-two projects that are a part of the Animating Democracy Lab. Each of the three selected Lab projects works with a team of three writers who bring different perspectives to the work. Writers were identified and largely chosen by the sites, in cooperation with Animating Democracy. They were asked to experience process (as appropriate and as time allowed) as well as product, and to speak with a range of people who were involved with the project. Writers were asked to consider the project's artistic and civic interests and inquiry, and to each write a piece that draws upon their own unique bodies of knowledge and experience. Dialogue among the different writers involved is an important part of the Critical Perspectives process.

THE SAN FRANCISCO MEETING

In November 2002, a meeting of the Critical Perspectives writers and invited guests was held at the **Tides Foundation**^{vi} in San Francisco. The intent of the meeting was to give writers an opportunity to share what they were encountering in the process of writing about the Animating Democracy projects, and more broadly, to discuss issues related to writing about civically engaged art. The meeting was structured primarily according to project (Dell'Arte's *Dentalium* project and the St. Augustine's Church/Lower East Side Tenement Museum's *Slave Galleries* project on the first day, MACLA's *Ties That Bind* project on the second morning). The writers then brainstormed to identify and surface resonant topics, both in writing about the projects and in the projects themselves, and the meeting culminated somewhat spontaneously in a full group discussion of the civic location of arts-based civic dialogue work. At the time of the meeting, the writing was in various stages of development. The gathering was a rare and valuable opportunity to have dialogue about things unfinished.

INTENT OF THIS PAPER

This paper draws from the transcripts of the San Francisco meeting. The writers' voices are present throughout,^{vii} along with those of guests and Animating Democracy representatives, including myself (participating as Animating Democracy staff). This article is arranged thematically or by issue focus, rather than as a chronological account of the meeting. My intent is to bring forward key discussions and areas of inquiry that emerged from the meeting, as they may be useful to a broader field of writers and practitioners. I have also included clarifying background information, and my own reflections and questions, at times.

II. THREE PROJECTS, NINE WRITERS

Below are the three Animating Democracy Lab projects that have been selected for Critical Perspectives, and introduction to the writers writing about them. These three projects were chosen to reflect the range and diversity of the Lab, just as the writers were invited from multiple fields with different relationships to the projects, using different approaches and various forms of writing. At the beginning of the meeting in San Francisco, the writers were asked to introduce themselves by answering the question, literally or figuratively, "Where are you coming from?" What follows is how the writers referred to themselves in the actual meeting. The meeting included a small number of guests and staff as well, also introduced below.

DELL' ARTE

Dell' Arte's *Dentalium Project* explores the economic impact, cultural and political conflict surrounding the construction of a Native American casino in the small rural community of Blue Lake, California. The project culminated with the production of a new play, *Wild Card*. The material for *Wild Card* emerged from a process of community discussions and interviews involving people throughout Blue Lake and the region who were involved with or affected by the opening of the new casino by the Blue Lake Rancheria. Writers are: David Rooks, an Oglala Lakota tribal member and journalist from South Dakota; Ferdinand Lewis, playwright, arts writer, and scholar in cultural planning and development, based in L.A.; Jim O'Quinn, arts writer, critic, and editor of *American Theatre* magazine, New York City.^{viii}

David Rooks—*Growing up, I spoke the Lakota language at home, but no one spoke it outside the home. I learned to hear it, but I never learned to express it. That creates a bifurcation of the world ... I am new to theatre. For Critical Perspectives, I've been hired as a Native American writer coming from journalism. As a journalist, you go in and try to undress the presuppositions. It's a codified curiosity ... I'm very concerned about the affect of casinos on native communities...*

Ferdinand Lewis—*I've written about this group [Dell' Arte] since 1991 ... In my writing, I try to bridge two unbridgeable things: economy-driven arts and non-market/off-market or social goods with existence value ... Animating Democracy is all about communication; in development, we call it communicative theory ...*

Jim O'Quinn—*I'm interested in getting into the minds of the artists themselves, to write about it from the event itself through the lens of what the artists intended to do. I'm interested in the social aspect of the audience interaction and this kind of theatre, and in the problems and challenges of actually bringing citizens of Blue Lake onto the stage (through the performers).*

ST. AUGUSTINE'S CHURCH / LOWER EAST SIDE TENEMENT MUSEUM

The *Slave Galleries Restoration and Preservation Project* brings together community leaders, scholars, and preservationists to restore and interpret an 1828 slave gallery in St. Augustine's Episcopal Church. The slave gallery is a cramped room where African American congregants were segregated during the 19th century. It is being interpreted in consultation with an ethnically and religiously diverse team of 30 community preservationists, who have received training in dialogue as part of the project. The slave gallery will be used to facilitate dialogues among and between constituents of various Lower East Side communities about issues of marginalization and exclusion in their local history. Writers are: Rodger Taylor, an historian, archivist, freelance writer, parishioner and member of the St. Augustine's Church Slave Galleries committee; Lorraine Johnson-Coleman, author, storyteller, performer and NPR Morning Edition commentator, based

in North Carolina (at the time of the meeting); and Jack Tchen, historian, activist, founder of the Chinatown History Museum (now known as the Museum of the Chinese in the Americas) and founding director of the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute at NYU.^{ix}

Lorraine Johnson Coleman—*Unlike you all, I am going to be the artist in this project, creating a work of fiction. I am not an analyst when it comes to the arts. A brief description of what I do: I'm a "folk artist." I interpret spaces, to give spaces voice. I'm creating a narrative that has an objective piece—a mixture of history, poetry and story-telling ... In my work, I try to balance the backlash of young people always having to hear all the horrible things about our history: out of that brutal history comes this beautiful culture. Looking at slaves not as victims, but as people who were smart enough to survive.*

Rodger Taylor—*I'm documenting the congregation's relationship to its own space and history—the merging of the two churches, and their relationships to the slave galleries. Secondly, what's happening now: the restoration, materials coming out of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, etc. The Slave Galleries, as a humanities project, needs the creative voice, to help people hear, but also because there's such a lack of documentation. I see my piece as, not a straight history, but ... Lorraine's writing will give me the freedom to focus on the facts.*

Jack Tchen—*I'm making connections with Lower East Side history and the Chinese community, using historical similarities as the basis of connection. Looking at silence, and the absence of public knowledge and access. Making connections to what's going on now: the gentrification of the Lower East Side, the extension of Chinatown, white flight and people buying up tenement buildings. I'm interested in writing a reconstructionist history of the street culture, looking for ways the community itself can name the key issues. One interesting aspect is facticity as a basis of the project—trying to prove that it really happened. I have to reconcile that against postmodern subjectivity...*

MOVIMIENTO DE ARTE Y CULTURA LATINO AMERICANA (MACLA)

MACLA's *Ties That Bind* project is a photographic, oral history, and public dialogue project that reflects upon the history of inter-marriage between Asians and Latinos in the Silicon Valley, in order to illuminate civic issues of intra- and inter-ethnic relations between them in California today. Visual artists Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn created new work for an exhibition/installation at MACLA, drawing upon mixed-heritage family photographs, and oral histories collected from local families. Writers are: Lydia Matthews, art historian, critic, and faculty in the Visual Criticism program, California College of Arts and Crafts; Michael Rosenfeld, sociologist with an interest in demography, faculty in the Department of Sociology, Stanford University, and former reporter for *The Nation*; and Renato Rosaldo, anthropologist, poet, Stanford University professor, and author of *Culture and Truth*.^x

Lydia Matthews—*I'm interested in the ways we visualize cultural identity, the visual information that pervades contemporary life and how it relates to art. I'm thinking about how exhibitions come to be and how they function in a community—seeing the role of the space of the gallery in culture-making as a generative force in itself, and looking at the affect on public art practice in general ... I'm also looking at the collaboration between the artists and how decisions about the final installation were made jointly. What's gained and lost in shifting the way an individual artist normally works?*

Renato Rosaldo—*Writing about this work is like laying an egg (something I know nothing about). I like doing stuff that I don't know how to do very well ... I like to blur the lines. I call myself as an "anthropoeta" ... How am I approaching the writing? I'm not sure yet. I'm in the early stages, very much at the drawing board; what is said in this meeting will affect what I do ... The center will be this process of the art realizing itself in the dialogue.*

Michael Rosenfeld—*Where I come from is a very different place from the rest of you. I write about changing social structures in the U.S., intermarriage and its place in people's lives. I have a very non-professional reaction to the art. I'm interested in how the personal is political, and the private public. Intermarried couples are always on display, in the public performance of partnership. U.S. policy and marriage law is all about control and government intervention in people's personal lives ...*

GUESTS AND STAFF

Guests at the San Francisco meeting included: artist and theorist of public art, **Suzanne Lacy**,^{xi} a pioneer in community development through art, creator of large scale public art works "The Crystal Quilt" (Minneapolis) and "Full Circle" (Chicago), and editor of *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*; **Jan Cohen-Cruz**, scholar-practitioner of activist and community-based performance, Associate Professor and Director of Theatre Studies in the NYU Tisch School of the Arts Drama Department, where she is also a faculty advisor for the Center for Art and Public Policy, and editor of *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology* (1998); **Mario Ontiveros**, a doctoral candidate in art history at the University of California Los Angeles whose dissertation, *Rethorizing Activism: The Aesthetics of Social Responsibility*, addresses the ethical implications of public art practices engaged in sociopolitical debates during the 1970s–1990s; and **Ann Daly**, advisor to the Critical Perspectives project, professor at the University of Texas, Austin, journalist, editor and author of *Done Into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America*.

Animating Democracy staff in attendance at the meeting included: Animating Democracy Co-Director **Pam Korza**; **Caron Atlas**, an independent consultant working to further the connection between art, culture, and social change, co-creator of Critical Perspectives; and myself, Animating Democracy Program Associate **Andrea Assaf**.

III. THE ROLE OF THE WRITER: CRITIC, COLLABORATOR, WITNESS OR ADVOCATE?

Jan: The critic isn't necessarily someone who just comes in at the end. If they really care about the work, why do they come in at the end?

Rodger: Clarification—are you saying that writers could be critics during the process, and that could enrich or empower the whole?

Jan: I didn't say be critics, I said contribute what they have at earlier stages that could be useful—the ability to frame questions, etc. Another way to go about it would be as partners. For example, Michael could have had conversations with the artists earlier ...

Michael: I wanted to see what they were going to do, to trust their own intuition. I didn't want to be seen as the outside expert.

Jan: But in partnership, that's one of the things to work on, to dismantle the power relations within collaborations.

What is the role of the writer in this area of civically engaged art? Is the writer a documenter, critic, collaborator, witness or advocate? What is the relationship between the writer and the artists, the writer and sponsoring organizations, the writer and the community, the writer and the reader? As Jan Cohen-Cruz asked, "What are models for writing about this work that are at once probing, informative, evocative, and accessible?"

POINT OF ENTRY: ENCOUNTER WITH PROCESS AND PRODUCT

Ann Daly commented that the point at which the writer encounters the project or enters the process is very important, with complex implications in terms of access and power. Suzanne Lacy reminded us that there is a long tradition of critics entering the process early in the visual arts, while Jim O'Quinn pointed out that in theatre, critics usually only encounter and assess the final production. An important claim of the Critical Perspectives project is that to only look at a finished "product," such as an exhibit or performance, is an extremely limited, incomplete and inaccurate, view of the realities and impact of this work.

In community-based, dialogue-oriented, or civically engaged art or humanities work, with so many layers of process and impact, how is the writer to capture all dimensions of a project? For example, the *Slave Galleries Project* includes the restoration of the physical galleries in the church; the presentation of historical research; the church community's involvement and leadership in the project; the partnership between St. Augustine's and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum; the dialogue trainings in which members of various religious and ethnic communities of the Lower East side

are trained to facilitate dialogues in their own communities; the use of the slave galleries themselves as a catalyst and site of inter-group dialogue; and the community preservationist meetings that are now branching out to identify other historic sites of conscience in the LES neighborhood. How are the writers to articulate all the ripple effects of such a multi-layered endeavor?

In some cases, even multiple writers are faced with the challenge of (un)covering all the undocumented dimensions of the work. As Caron Atlas asked, “How are we to write about the invisible elements of a project?” In the case of Dell’Arte, for example, the writers were not able to be part of the pre-production dialogues, partly due to the timeline of Critical Perspectives itself in relation to the timeline of the Lab project, and partly because some were by invitation to local participants only. Early community dialogues (which included members of both white and Native American communities, artists and political leaders) were not recorded, because trust-building was an important focus, and the facilitators wanted participants to feel comfortable expressing themselves in an uncensored way. The Critical Perspectives writers now have the challenge of trying to access all the pieces of the process, through interviews, public documentation, existing media coverage, and so on, knowing that the final theatre piece is not representative of the whole. David Rooks expressed a sense of urgency and unfinished work when he offered the following metaphor for trying to write about the project: “I’ve invited a guest for dinner, the doorbell just rang, and I’m shuffling through the cupboard looking for ingredients I don’t have ...”

In the case of MACLA, the three writers encountered *Ties That Bind* at very different points, and have chosen to focus on different aspects: process, the exhibition, and the post-exhibit dialogue. As each writer details and discusses his/her own tail, ear, or leg, their compiled writings will grasp at a holistic view of the proverbial elephant.

INSIDER, OUTSIDER, EXPERT?

In a project that is based on the concept of multiple perspectives, challenges and possibilities arise when the writer is either “inside” or “outside” of the project or community s/he is writing about. Certainly there are complex issues of representation to consider when the writer is an “outsider,” particularly when s/he occupies a position of greater power historically or in the contemporary social framework. The writers participating in Critical Perspectives, however, often occupy multiple positions, belonging to multiple “communities” with overlapping identities. A writer may be simultaneously an insider and an outsider, depending on how one identifies the varying degrees of inside or out: by affinity, identity, geography, etc. For example, Lorraine Johnson Coleman is “inside” in terms of racial identity and political identification, as an African American; but she is also “outside” in terms of geographic community, currently living in the South (although previously from New York). David, too, occupies both insider and outsider positions, as a Native American writer who is not from the specific community involved in the project. Michael Rosenfeld, on the other hand, is neither Asian or Latino, but he lives in San Jose. Jack Tchen is not part of the St. Augustine’s or African American community, but as a former museum director in Chinatown, has a long history of involvement with communities on the Lower East side.

Rodger Taylor’s position as an insider, of both the Lower East Side’s African-American community and of this specific congregation, offers the possibility of detailed documentation of the experiences and shifts within the community most directly involved and affected by the project, but also carries possible liabilities of self-disclosure. In other words, as Caron noted, it raises the question, “What do people *not* say when you’re inside?” Rodger shared the complexities of his task: “I’m struggling with how critical I’m going to be, considering my own position with the project, as a member of the church ... I’m trying to deal with the issue of some people’s resistance to the project, and the influence of the few people who objected.” While the insider perspective offers a more intimate and detailed account that can be useful to others—a kind of witnessing as Lydia Matthews suggested—it’s also subject to potential pressure from internal relationships and power dynamics. The writer may feel a more direct sense of accountability, which arguably all writers should embrace, but may also feel limited by knowing that s/he will have to live with the repercussions of what is made public.

Lorraine commented that in communities that struggle with internalized oppression, the outsider is often considered to have more validity; she said, “When other people come around to say this story has value, the black community takes notice.” She saw Jack’s position as a writer from outside the African-American community as drawing attention to the project, which is good, but advocated for the importance of the insider model as potentially empowering, a way

of acknowledging the legitimacy of self-representation. Lorraine and Rodger echoed the importance of who's telling the story—the writer's relationship to the community and stakeholders.

In some cases, however, “outsiders” may also feel a strong sense of accountability, depending on their objectives. Jack articulated the outsider position as an opportunity to present juxtapositions that create new possibilities for dialogue—such as bringing to light the image of black women, Irish women and Chinese men competing for the laundry business in the same neighborhood. What is published may either enhance or put at risk new or fragile inter-community relations.

Renato Rosaldo, in his interviews with community participants in the MACLA project, encountered the question, what do people *not* say when you're *outside*? To a certain extent, perhaps every one is "outside" any specific intermarriage experience. Renato observed a sense of risk and vulnerability when he interviewed a couple in their home. He remarked, “What most impressed me was what was *not* said and what I saw out of the corner of my eye ... There were things we couldn't do in the interview because of the nature of the [personal, unspoken] contract ... [things] that would have been violating the contract they had between them to present a united front ... How does one write about the issue of display and fears of exposure of one's subjects? How do we write about what's said and what's unsaid?” Caron added that interviewees often say what they think the interviewer expects them to say; and at the same time, they often do or say the unexpected. As an *anthropoeta* who explores the borders of form in his writing, Renato wondered about the limits of fictionalizing interviews in order to protect and yet reveal, but questioned how to do it without making it appear that one of the subjects actually said it. Lorraine concurred that “sometimes narrative is the most freeing way to tell the truth.” When experimenting with such choices, how much does the writer have to be transparent about his/her own process?

The artists and community participants involved in *Ties That Bind* knew of Critical Perspectives, and some had a tendency to think of the writers, with their respective backgrounds in anthropology, sociology and critical theory, as the outside “experts.” Michael Rosenfeld perceived a sense of “maybe they should tell us what to do” that was both intimidating for the artists and frustrating for the writers. Michael had critiques of MACLA's interpretation of demographic facts, which they presented with the exhibit, but nonetheless didn't want to intervene, feeling that it was more important to observe what they were doing with factual information in the context of an art-based project. “It was interesting to me,” he commented, “that they said San Jose was special in terms of amount of intermarriage. That's not true—San Jose is really typical nationally—but it was interesting to me that they said that. They put a little more dramatic spin on the rise of intermarriage, but I think that was appropriate.” Had he accepted the “expert” position, he may have impacted the project in a questionable way.

THE QUESTION OF COLLABORATION

David Rooks asked, “How much participation should writers have, and at what point does it interfere?” Rodger encouraged developing a sense of partnership between writers from different communities, and from different positions of inside and out. He suggested that knowing how the other writers are approaching the project gives each individual more freedom to focus clearly and deeply on his/her own point of reference. Jan Cohen-Cruz, with her experiments with dialogic writing, wondered about how writers and project artists, or collectives of writers, might work together to exchange information and points of view that would mutually inform their work, and perhaps create new, hyphenated or hybrid forms.

Michael and Lorraine, however, expressed some reservations about the degree to which the process should be collaborative. As two writers who are accustomed to working very specifically in their fields—one as a social scientist, one as a performing artist—they were more interested in contributing the particularity of what they do than in blurring the boundaries of discipline, or risking compromise in their own distinct points or choices. Michael posed the question, “How does multi-disciplinarity add to creative work [both in the projects and in writing about them], and when do too many cooks spoil the broth?”

A small group discussion on Form, Strategy and Audience concluded that: the various projects are all very different, and the notion of multiple perspectives works differently in each one. The form and strategy of each offers a paradigm

that might be used in future approaches to writing. The challenge of exploring form is to find a way to embody dialogue in the writing itself, demonstrating what multiple perspectives can look like.

USEFULNESS, LANGUAGE AND AUDIENCE

Suzanne: Why do we write and for whom?

Ann: How does a writer's voice create an implicit or explicit relationship with the reader? How can that relationship between writer and reader itself be a dialogic relationship, or one that generates dialogue?

Lydia: How does our desired context or audience affect the content of a piece? Are we trying to develop a kind of writing that moves across multiple audiences and develops a hybrid sensibility, or are we trying to challenge our own specific fields?

Lorraine: How do we make this material useful—both academically relevant and accessible to most people? Where is the community voice in Critical Perspectives?

These are some of the questions that participants in the San Francisco meeting brought forward in relation to the notion of usefulness. Jack Tchen described the dilemma of the writer as one of language and dissemination. How can a multidisciplinary writing project approach publishing in academic journals, grassroots publications, journalistic periodicals, and other venues that have vastly different readership and language norms? One suggestion was to publish individual writings in their respective disciplines, and to cross-reference, encouraging readers to venture into unfamiliar fields. The group was not sure whether there are existing venues in which all forms would have equal validity. Should a future direction of this work be to create venues for multiple voices to coexist? Or is a certain amount of linguistic exclusion inevitable?

Mario Ontiveros pointed out that, “as writers, we're dealing with a lack of language and terms to get at the issues.” Even within a meeting of accomplished writers from different disciplines, we encountered barriers of language. Not everyone was familiar with certain terms—such as essentialism, for example—and even those familiar with academic discourse could not come to agreement on its meaning and usage. The term had the power to exclude nearly half the group from the conversation. It's a meaningful term, loaded with history, that could have been useful in examining particular points of view about representation; but how could we have a conversation about it if not everyone has access to the same history and terminology? How can writing be dialogic, accessible, and useful without sufficiently agreed upon language? Mario reminded us that language and methodology are issues when writing about these projects, just as they are issues in the projects themselves.^{xii}

ASSESSMENT: FAILURE VS. RISK

"The ability for the public to draw meaning from the artistic experience is, in part, a measure of the success of civically engaged art."

- Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue^{xiii}

The writer as critic has a tremendous amount of power in relation to the artists and cultural organizations s/he writes about. More conventional paradigms of criticism position the writer as a voice of authority or expertise, empowered to assess or judge the relative success or failure of an art project, usually according to terms defined by the critic or current norms of critical practice. What the writer writes can have a tremendous impact on the artist or arts organization, affecting their ability to continue producing work (in the form of credibility, funding opportunities, audience or community participation). Bringing writers together from different fields, backgrounds, and positions in relation to a project, however, challenges the singular authority of the critic. Empowering multiple perspectives surfaces questions such as: whose standards do we apply to a project and what are the goals of critique? As Suzanne Lacy asked, “If you consider your practice a power practice, who is it you are trying to affect and in what way?”

The success or failure question can be seen in relation to the aesthetics of artistic product (to the extent that the writer or critic is knowledgeable about that aesthetic or cultural form), which is the most common approach to conventional art criticism. But there are many other ways to approach the question of assessment. Ben Cameron of Theater Communications Group (TCG) has suggested that, in reflecting on community-based work, critics should consider not only the aesthetic “quality” of artistic work, but also the *value* of the overall project within its social context. If the “value” of a project, however, is understood as the extent to which it benefits a community, then the question becomes, what does benefit mean, and according to whose criteria? Assessing the impact a project has on community or civic life is one of the great challenges of writing about this arena of work. At the San Francisco meeting, Mario Ontiveros suggested that challenge includes raising and considering ethical questions, while Ferdinand introduced the idea of failure versus risk.

How critical should the writer be when assessing a single project within the long-term goals of an organization? How do we assess outcome in relation to intent? Ann Daly noted that in every case study, there is a point of fear, at which the artists or organizers either make a safe choice, or take a risk. David Rooks elaborated, “You can't really expect them to come out to home base and hit a homerun the first time. Art is about taking risk, and being inclusive from the beginning, so that we can create a new voice. I get a painful feeling when art is a dead letter. Celebratory art—what I call ‘beads and feather art’—that becomes what you are, the new caricature. I want art to take more risk.” Mario mentioned that even if an arts group has been in their community for a long time, a track record of success can keep them from taking risks. An awareness of the power and potential impact of the critic’s pen can add to the sense of fear that some artists or organizations may feel, which can prevent the kind of risk-taking required to achieve either aesthetic innovation or social transformation. Jack raised the question of power and representation embedded in the writer-practitioner relationship. “How comfortable do we feel airing out complicated issues,” he asked, “that fix the way in which the artists and other players are characterized, because there's a ‘failure?’” Ann, too, objected to use of the word “failure.” Ferdinand’s call for an approach to assessment that considers risk-taking and intent, like the notion of social value, shifts the language away from “success and failure” to a more complex and intricate set of evaluative relations.

Caron Atlas brought the group to thinking carefully about accountability. What responsibilities does an artist or cultural organization have to the process of working with a community, and to the long-term impact of the project? How do we write about process, and link the notion of intent back to impact? It’s important to consider accountability in relation to original intent and planning, she suggested, but also in relation to the effects of what actually happened. While Caron generally shies away from the assumption that assessment is the writer’s job (or even right), she gives serious consideration to the ethical and political questions that a project raises. Caron reminded the group that it’s not only the writers who should be situated as problem-solvers, but artists and organizers in the projects themselves.

Ferdinand’s response, however, was to ask whether “that’s too much pressure to put on a work of art...What burden are we putting on artists to solve these problems? Art is a very sophisticated problem-solving process; it’s the artist’s responsibility to think through all the issues as an *aesthetic* component of these projects.” To what extent *should* critics hold artists to goals of reconciliation or social transformation?

In addition to being accountable to communities and stake-holders, arts and cultural organizations, to some extent, are accountable to the terms and conditions of grants they apply for and receive. Lydia Matthews raised the question: “What does it mean for an arts organization to commission artists to work in a particular way, in community (for the grant)? There seems to be an increasingly administratively-driven agenda because of access to funding. What does it mean to have an administrative structure determining the form(s) of the work made?” Ferdinand pointed to funding as another variable to be considered in the assessment process: “Funders and arts administrators are also part of the accountability structure. If you’re going to hold an art project to that goal, you have to give them the resources to do it.” Caron agreed that it’s important for writers to be aware of the politics of resources for a community organization (as distinct from a large institution) doing this work, especially in relation to access and questions of timeline or sustainability. She said, “Everybody’s really cooking just when the project is over and the funding has run out.” Ferdinand’s suggestion: “Fund culture, not projects.”

Lorraine Johnson Coleman asked if writings coming out of Critical Perspectives could aim to tap into some solutions (without just criticizing the communities or cultural workers). Renato agreed that it’s not about jumping on a group

for what's already done, but trying to look ahead to what could be done in the future. Ferdinand framed the writer's role as one of advocacy as much as critique, viewing the work as "an abundance that needs to be shared (instead of a lack that needs to be filled)." Lorraine used the example of "the tradition of African praise poetry as a way of introducing oneself to the world," and asked whether that notion of introducing a still-emerging field of civically engaged arts practice could be a model for writing about this kind of work.

David Rooks raised the question, "Are there observational biases in the writers that *should* be welcomed into the dialogue?" At the meeting, he was struggling with his background in journalism, with its belief in objective reporting, and his own personal and political reactions to the Dell'Arte project. Jan Cohen-Cruz encouraged an acknowledgement of subjectivity in response to questions of how to write about this work. She remarked, "I heard David say, 'I'm a journalist, I shouldn't be angry in writing about it,' and I thought, why not? What's important about where we're coming from in relation to writing? Your perspective and what you're moved by are exactly why you were chosen to write for this."

Drawing from her thinking about existing in a state of hyphenation, Jan Cohen-Cruz offered a final reflection in response to initial question: Is the writer a collaborator, critic, witness or advocate? She concluded, "When we're lucky, all these multiple roles and aspects rub together in ourselves and in our work; when we're not lucky, we become fragmented about who we are and what we bring."

IV. SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN ARTS-BASED CIVIC DIALOGUE PROJECTS

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND DIALOGUE

The connection, or disconnect, between the dialogue process and the artistic process is often a sensitive moment in arts-based civic dialogue work. Understanding this relationship is one of the challenges of writing about it. In any civically engaged art project, there are multiple sites of dialogue. Dialogue may be a method of research for a project, may be integrated into the creative process or aesthetic, or may be designed in conjunction with or in response to the artistic work. The Critical Perspectives writers discussed various locations of dialogue in the three projects, and offered the following reminders: Not all dialogue is interpersonal or conversational, some is internal; if a work of art can create internal dialogue, that's significant. Dialogue is sometimes conducted through body language, behavior, visual imagery, sound, movement and other forms of performance, and in that, it's important to resist prioritizing the verbal or linguistic. Collaboration among artists, between the artists and the curator, or artists and community participants during the creative process, are all, likewise, sites of dialogue. But Ann Daly reminded the group to keep in the forefront of their thinking an additional frame and function of the Animating Democracy project: "Where's the *civic* dialogue? The place where the personal or private spins out to a civic site..."^{xiv}

Renato explained his interest in looking at MACLA's *Ties That Bind* as a process or series of moments most realized in the public dialogue, which included multiple generations of the families, public TV and media, the artists, and himself as one of the writers. "If you're thinking of this as civic," he said, "to bring these relationships into a public space, having felt themselves invisible in the past, *is civic* ... I felt this was the realization of the project. It's not a bad thing for a public work of art, in the context of civic dialogue and democracy, to realize itself most in the dialogue. I think that's fabulous." While Ferdinand expressed interest in introducing the process of civic dialogue as theatre, Suzanne Lacy has long been an advocate of positioning *dialogue as art*: "The theatre or performance art that *is* the discussion; my works are all framed as dialogue, and as art."

REPRESENTATION, AUTHORITY, RECONCILIATION

Lorraine: Once my mother said to me, "I remember what being on my knees for white people felt like, I don't need to look at a painting about it. You can go to school and learn what you want, but you don't have a right to tell me when to heal and what time it is!"

The Critical Perspectives writers began the weekend with an in-depth conversation about the Dell'Arte *Dentalium Project*, particularly focusing on issues of representation in the play, *Wild Card*. Although Native American community members had participated in dialogue groups, the production ultimately had no Native American representation on stage, and the multiple perspectives offered by the play were predominantly those from within the white community. David explained, "It was very entertaining, but there was no Native voice in the play. For me, that painfully illustrated, dramatically, that there is no Native voice in this community. They are not seen, the local government has not taken them seriously ... My experience in border towns is that people stop being curious about a story. It's been happening for so many generations that people don't even notice that certain stories aren't there ... So what you have is a play about how all the non-Native people are upset about the casino, and you never hear the Native perspective. I have to honor that they were presenting the truth that they could present, under the circumstances, but it was a repetition of the same historical situation." Several of the writers found the play problematic, while others emphasized that the production was only one aspect of a much longer project, and advocated looking closely at the theater group's history and process, its long-term relationship to local communities, and the complexities of this particular political event (the opening of the casino).

Recognizing issues of power, both historical and contemporary, is very important. Jack commented, "Part of dialogic process is being able to share authority...Who's authority is being expressed in this process?" He gave the example of the *Slave Galleries* project, in which "different people have different authorities and expertise." Although issues of ownership and control do surface, that project, Jack noted, is being defined by the people who run and inhabit the space—the Deacon, the congregation—and the community preservationists that the Church has invited in to help. Jack introduced the notion of a *communicative circuit*, offering the example of museum programming in which artist, audience and curator are not separated, but connected and mutually influencing the development of an exhibit.

Renato Rosaldo added, "People themselves have pretty good ideas about what it would mean for them to be enfranchised." Lorraine shared her experience as a community-based artist: "I am brought in when communities have been so left out of artistic process, and so marginalized, that they think they can't go out to the theatre and understand it and see themselves ... The academic community gets together and talks about what's wrong, and talks and talks ... until finally I had to go to the black community. Because I know the pain of going home and saying, 'My lord, how long?'"

By the end of the weekend, this topic of representation and authority gave rise to a discussion of strategies of reconciliation. Ferdinand Lewis recommended that artists and cultural organizations must give thought to accountability and sustainability in the planning process, and look at culture first. "You can't help people," he said, "unless you know who they are; otherwise, you're just turning them into you." Community members who are stakeholders in the issue at hand must be included in defining the goals—whether community-building, dialogue and story-sharing, activism, or other civic impact—and setting expectations that are achievable and agreed upon by all participants. David also reminded, "When art and projects like this come together, whatever community this takes place in, know that dialogues are already going on. The new dialogue has to take that into account."

Jack Tchen proposed that the goal of reconciliation be considered in designing the *process* of a civically engaged art project. "It's easy to say what was wrong in hindsight," he said, "but how do you reconcile groups that have, historically, been very divided? You need to have a strategy of reconciliation *before*. How can projects be designed in a way, from the beginning, to maximize the collaborations?" On the last day of the San Francisco meeting, a small group had a focused discussion to further explore these questions. They reported back suggesting a three-part process: 1) an honest collective investigation of the status quo, with an understanding of what's involved in building real dialogue, including work that needs to be done up front to lay the groundwork and identify the terms of that dialogue; 2) a very clear agreement or contract up front, according to criteria mutually agreed upon and shared, recognizing historical grievances and the time it takes to build relationships. (This process implies the evaluation criteria, and addresses the question, "what does benefit mean?"); and 3) follow-up with affirmative acts of reconstruction to redress unequal power relationships, and evaluation—including reflection and writing, considering how to measure whether it lived up to its own objectives.

FRAMING

MACLA's *Ties That Bind* project offers an opportunity to look at the importance of how a project is framed. Jack pointed out that there are many internal differences in both Asian and Latino communities, and, "to frame difference as between Asians and Latinos, as two groups, is problematic ... It's assuming we know what boundaries they're crossing, as race or ethnicity; maybe they're really crossing class or power relations, complexities and hierarchies we don't know." Regarding the Dell' Arte project, Caron called our attention to the fact that, in Blue Lake, "The white community was not in agreement; they were not monolithic. The play became not about the casino, but about power in their city and how things are run. It became about power struggles within the white community." One could argue that the first issue for Dell' Arte is that the *Dentalium* project was originally framed as for and about "the Blue Lake community," which then becomes a question of who gets included or excluded in that definition. As Jack said, "Who's becoming a part of the 'we,' and what exclusion is going on there?" Similarly, I pointed out that in MACLA's *Ties That Bind* project, the prompt question for participation by inter-racial or inter-cultural couples was framed as "intermarriage" or "family." While participants were entirely self-defined, of the fifteen couples and families that participated, all of them were heterosexual partnerships. The project was not intentionally exclusive of homosexual partnerships, but the language chosen may have inadvertently functioned to exclude.

AESTHETICS AND THE LIMITS OF GENRE

An intriguing point of discussion that came up in various ways throughout the meeting concerned the extent to which particular aesthetic choices might pose limitations in relation to civic dialogue goals. For example, with all the issues of representation, cultural sensitivity and inclusion that the Dell' Arte project faced, certain decisions were made with regard to the performance style of the company. Comedia Dell' Arte, the European theatre form that is the basis of the company's work, is a specific aesthetic with a very specific physical and aesthetic training process. Though the company has consciously adapted Comedia Dell' Arte to their environment and commitment to theatre of place, still it is not a form that community members can perform without prior experience. There were no Native American actors in the Dell' Arte company at the time of this production, and with issues of representation in mind, Dell' Arte made a conscious choice not to have non-Native actors play Native Americans on stage. Also, Dell' Arte's style is typically satirical—they make fun of everyone, with the idea of "equal time, equal insult."^{xv} Given the political sensitivity of the moment, however, the company was uncomfortable making fun of the Rancheria. Some argued that the company arrived at complicated choices directly as a result of considering historical tensions and the current climate in relation to the *aesthetic* of the project. Ann Daly suggested that perhaps the artists were "hemmed in with by their genre," and were struggling with its limitations and implications.

Jan Cohen-Cruz asked a similar question in relation to the MACLA project. Ann noted that "in a project about intermarriage, there was a drive for a unified voice, and a unified collaboration between the artists," which may have imposed its own limitations. The creators of the exhibit encountered many challenges as they attempted to collaborate, and eventually, the photojournalist involved opted out of the final stages of putting the exhibit together. Jan asked, "Did they have to unify it into one aesthetic? As a project of multiple perspectives, could part of the exhibit have been a photojournalism exhibit, and another part an installation?" Suzanne Lacy also pointed to the limitations of framing the piece as a gallery exhibition instead of as a public discursive work. She saw it more as a hybrid, a performative work, ideally informed by dynamics discovered in the process of creating it, as well as by sociological information and discourse.

Michael Rosenfeld talked about the limits of visual representation in dealing with something like ethnic difference. Lydia raised the question, "how does the use of stereotypes play out in the visual arts community," consciously or unconsciously? She pointed out that this continues to be a source of heated discussions among artists, scholars and audiences, and is often marked by generational differences.

Upon reflection following the San Francisco meeting, I found myself ruminating on a number of questions. Can we really say that a given genre or aesthetic has limitations, or that certain aesthetics are not suitable to certain subject matter, political conditions, or dialogic goals? What are the implications of making that claim? Are we underestimating the creativity of artists to solve problems within their forms, or the potential of the forms themselves? If we consider each mode of cultural production as a power practice, as Suzanne and others suggest, then we must consider that

different genres or aesthetics have different histories and positions of power. Is it appropriate, then, to attempt to address issues of power, economy, historical injustice, and representation between Native and non-Native peoples, for example, through a European theatrical aesthetic? Is it even possible to achieve equal representation and multiple perspectives of different cultural groups through a singular mode of cultural production? To me, the discussion suggested the importance of taking into consideration the historical meaning and context of a form or aesthetic itself, asking how a particular genre or aesthetic may help or hinder the overall goals of a project. As Jack Tchen commented, "the form of how we do things can be more important than what we say."

V. THE CIVIC LOCATION OF THE WORK

"We're sitting underneath a sleeping giant."

The San Francisco meeting culminated with a discussion attempting to identify the "civic location" of arts-based civic dialogue work, and the writing about it. Jack Tchen framed the discussion for the group, beginning with questioning the various meanings and relationships of dialogue, democracy, analysis and evaluation (often seen as separate processes, he said). "Civic dialogue is often assumed to be a good in itself, and analysis is not always built in. How does it connect to democracy, representation, and truth? ... How can we begin to articulate the ways these things meet each other, and be clear about what we're trying to do, both as practitioners and as writers?" How do we locate the value, function, and impact of the larger project of civically engaged art?

There was some discussion of the relevance and impact of the historic moment, and current events, in relation to the task and responsibility (or "response/ability," as Arlene Goldbard has written) of writing about arts-based civic dialogue work. The San Francisco meeting took place a year after September 11, on the cusp of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Caron Atlas raised the issue of silencing and dissent in the political environment of the moment; she asked how the writer fits in, and can potentially function as a protagonist, politically. Lydia Matthews pointed also to the "extraordinary (economic) fragility of community-based spaces at this moment ... In this grander regime of silencing, those spaces are the only remaining cracks for dissenting views. The stakes are helping people rethink how those spaces can function in their communities. As a writer, I feel a need to think institutionally as well as systemically." Jack offered a metaphor for this juncture, sensing it as a "water convergence, a delta—a threshold moment." He posed the question, "What is needed at this historic moment in writing about arts-based civic dialogue, and more broadly, to advance it?"

RATIONALITY, EXCLUSION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Lorraine Johnson Coleman raised the question, "Is civic art the same as democratic art?" Must civically engaged work necessarily utilize democratic processes? The group did not suggest that to be true, but it led to a discussion of who is included and excluded both in creative process and in public space. Renato Rosaldo offered a story of one woman in San Jose who said that by going to Catholic church, she felt she was "participating in rituals of her own exclusion." With groups that have been historically subordinated or marginalized, how do people begin to be heard, to have authority? He emphasized the importance of seeing what inclusion means to them, and exploring how it works in different contexts – observing cultural signals, stories of respect, etc. "It's not that it doesn't always work," he said, "it works *differently*. The art of it is to say, I don't know what dignity or respect means to somebody else, I have to find out." Renato suggested that this realm of work is "trying to find a vernacular notion of citizenship" defined by having voice and being heard in the greater society (sometimes termed "cultural citizenship," as distinct from legal citizenship, which is often, Renato pointed out, "meaningless, because immigrants still have no authority"). As well as understanding inclusion, Renato brought forward the importance of understanding what the mechanisms of exclusion are in a society.

Jack referenced the historical critique, now prominent in academic discourse, of the European idea of the public sphere, shaped by Enlightenment era notions of rationality and freedom. Dominant U.S. society inherited these concepts in its early formation, to the extent that contemporary notions of what is considered appropriate, civil, or

rational behavior in civic or public space are still influenced by them. Certain modes of expression or emotionality are often considered inappropriate, uncivil, or even “irrational.” Lorraine pointed out that there are a lot of communities who never accepted that notion of rationality. Renato mentioned that, “in the Chicano community, people don’t trust anyone who’s not speaking from the heart.” David Rooks gave another example: “From a Native perspective, that’s when you have to put your hand on your wallet. Historically, we get pieces of paper, they get land ... When it becomes abstract and legalistic, then you have negotiations of power. We have a Native saying: ‘Don’t listen to what they say, watch what they do.’”^{xvi} Jack continued to say that people who have been excluded from the public sphere want to be a part of it; but once it’s opened up to include multiple communities with different cultural and historical experiences, “You have to acknowledge the emotional dimensions. So what do we do now?,” he asked, “Do we give up the notion of rationality? There’s a new ‘rationality’ that takes into account personal experience. We need to come up with better practices of analysis, including people in creating them, and having them enter the public realm.”

VI. CONCLUSION: FUTURE DIRECTIONS / FINAL REFLECTIONS

“It’s like peering over a fence and realizing I’m actually on the other side.” – Jim O’Quinn

Many of the same issues that arise in conducting civically engaged art and humanities projects also surface in the process of writing about them. Mario Ontiveros reminded the group to be self-reflective about the responsibilities of writing. He asked, “Do we hold artists to a sense of ethics that we don’t hold ourselves to (in daily life and in writing about these projects)? Do you critique the artists in the projects more than you critique yourselves as writers?” To accept Mario’s challenge, writers must hold themselves to the same accountability they desire to see in artistic and cultural practice, and remain aware of how these issues play out in both the projects and the writing.

Suzanne emphasized that artists, organizers and writers should all be thinking with the same level of creativity and rigor—asking questions, considering impact, using metaphor. She stated that many contemporary artists lack the ability to analyze power, and that it’s an important dimension that critical writers can bring, to legitimize such awareness in their own fields as well as in the art world. Jack agreed that “it’s not just the work of art itself we should be writing about, but the larger frame or phenomenon ... The writing piece adds a whole new element, with the possibility of being a bridge to other groups, or a catalyst for dialogue within other groups.”

While the goal of Critical Perspectives is to expand who has voice and authority in writing about civically engaged art, there’s still farther to go in including and empowering the full range of critical voices—“critical” both in the sense of offering critique, and in the sense of being deeply important to the accurate representation and understanding of this work.

For further information, discussion and resources, or to read the collected **Critical Perspectives Writings**, visit the Animating Democracy website at www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy

ⁱ **Critical Perspectives Concept Paper**

ⁱⁱ The **Animating Democracy Initiative** (ADI), launched in the fall of 1999, is a four-year initiative of Americans for the Arts, the nation’s leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts, and is made possible with support from The Ford Foundation. Animating Democracy’s purpose is to foster artistic activity that encourages civic dialogue on important contemporary issues and to promote the concept of arts-based civic dialogue.

ⁱⁱⁱ Critical Perspectives Concept Paper

^{iv} The notion of “usefulness” of art or writing, particularly academic writing, is one that often falls under fierce debate, and has been a sensitive point even among the creators and advisors of Critical Perspectives. Here, I interpret Caron Atlas’ use of the term “useful” to mean “relevant, accessible, and usable” to cultural institutions, artists, organizers, arts advocates, etc. – i.e., beyond the academy as well as within it.

^v Critical Perspectives Concept Paper

^{vi} **Tides Foundation** partners with donors to increase and organize resources for positive social change. www.tidesfoundation.org

^{vii} All quotes and paraphrases included herein are excerpted directly from meeting transcripts, recorded by Andrea Assaf, unless otherwise noted.

^{viii} **Critical Perspectives Press Release**

^{ix} op. cit.

^x op. cit.

^{xi} “**Seeking An American Identity (Working Inward from the Margins)**,” Suzanne Lacy, 2003.

http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/resource_center/resources_content.asp?id=212

^{xii} Additionally, theatre practitioner and scholar Sonja Kuflinec notes that, “Finding common language, concerns, and frameworks of reference remains an ongoing pursuit for those interested in dialogic rather than antagonistic relationships between writers and artists.” For further discussion, see her article “**Critical Relations in Community-Based Performance: The Artist and Writer in Conversation**” on the Animating Democracy website.

http://www.americansforthearts.org/animatingdemocracy/resource_center/resources_content.asp?id=176

^{xiii} **Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue** (A Report Commissioned by the Ford Foundation), by Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Pam Korza, and Cheryl Yuen. Americans For The Arts, 1999.

^{xiv} Animating Democracy includes a range of dialogue specialists, organizations and practitioners, who embrace various definitions and criteria of dialogue, as distinct from other forms of verbal communication. For a working definition of arts-based civic dialogue, references and links, visit the **Animating Democracy** website. Further discussion of the meanings of dialogue, civic and democracy can be found in the Civic Location section of this paper.

^{xv} Caron Atlas quoting Julie Fulkerson, dialogue consultant for the *Dentalium Project*.

^{xvi} An afterthought: How might this cultural directive—not to listen but to watch—arising understandably from historical injustice and exploitation, potentially affect inter-group dialogue efforts, when dialogue and arts facilitators alike typically emphasize “listening” as an important skill, practice and pre-requisite for dialogue? It becomes easy to see how reconciliation efforts might be immediately, inadvertently undermined by the assumption that “listening is good,” desirable and productive, when Native American experience and conventional wisdom clearly demonstrates, and presupposes, otherwise. On the other hand, a facilitator’s knowledge of this saying might creatively expand the notion of listening, to be more action-based or physicalized, including body language or group exploration of the relationship between statements and subsequent action. It could even necessitate connecting dialogue programming to civic action, social or policy change efforts, in order to validate the dialogue in the eyes of the community.