

# Conducting Civic Dialogue: A Challenging Role for Museums

SELMA HOLO

"What are the institutional challenges and opportunities for cultural organizations in linking art and civic dialogue?" This was the overarching question discussed at the Animating Democracy Initiative's Seattle convening in May 2002 of cultural organizations involved in the Animating Democracy Lab. I accepted the invitation to attend this Learning Exchange because, in 1996, I had been a member of a focus group whose assignment was to consider the direction the Ford Foundation might take as it launched its next major initiative. I remained curious about the outcome of the group's work. I remember leaving that focus group thinking that Ford was moving toward exploring and enhancing the relationship of arts institutions to a more democratic civic life. Not having been involved thereafter, I was intrigued to see that the specific shape the general idea had taken was in developing the artistic means to encourage public dialogue among citizens about important contemporary issues. As it happened, the Animating Democracy Initiative, a program of Americans for the Arts, has grown into a large project, and the questions its participants are asking have grown more challenging and subtle as time has passed.

The challenges and opportunities faced by cultural organizations attending in Seattle were grounded in their specific project experiences where the dialogue elements had been wholly or partially funded by the Animating Democracy Initiative, familiarly known as ADI.

To create a starting point for our conversations, all participants were supplied with a handout reminding us of ADI's working definition of arts-based civic dialogue. A "composite definition of dialogue" was extracted from Study Circles Resource Center materials and from Daniel Yankelovich's book, The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation, and expanded by ADI. Dialogue, as we would struggle with the idea and its manifestations, is framed, more or less, as the following:

Two or more parties with differing viewpoints working toward common understanding in an open-ended, most often, face-to-face format; an inclusion of multiple and possibly conflicting perspectives which allows assumptions to be brought out into the open and encourages participants to suspend judgment in order to foster understanding and to break down obstacles; seeks to create equality among participants... and aim for a greater understanding of others' viewpoints through empathy.

The introductory packet also included an unambiguous chart about what dialogue isn't, that is, dialogue is not debate. Debate is dedicated to being right and combative, to defending and winning. It appeared at first as if the process of understanding the relationship of the arts to the democratizing potential of civic dialogue would be a simple one. Only after the Learning Exchange did it become apparent just how complex a process achieving dialogue is. This seems so when the themes of the art experience are "hot button issues." How complex the process also depends on the unique nature of the artistic project as it tries to generate an authentic community response. While always generative, the desired degree and quality of dialogue demonstrated by the various cases presented during the convening were seldom easy to attain or sustain.

Furthermore, dialogue, rather than solving problems, often seems to generate more questions than it answers. Inquiries at the Learning Exchange related to: the paradoxes of museums attempting to be challenging and safe places at the same time; the degree of context appropriate to the art; the appropriate moment when dialogue should enter into

the experience of the art; and the lasting results of cultural organizations' efforts to instigate civic dialogue. In the process of examining questions together, participants learned to embrace (or at least to tolerate) ambiguity within the art and the civic issue addressed by their projects that previously would have been impossible. But the lingering question seemed to be: did the projects make a real and durable difference to the communities where they took place?

I came to the Seattle Learning Exchange from the world of museums, so I decided to mostly observe the museum sessions. Still, I was taken by the session dedicated to the related universe of public art. The restoration of the King Kamehameha I statue in Hawaii was a fascinating example of how a true commitment to civic involvement could produce entirely unexpected results for a conservation project. The restoration of this beloved monument did not proceed as scientists in the world of art conservation would have expected—or even as they might have initially believed appropriate.

Glenn Wharton, a conservator (ordinarily a "top dog" figure in the art world), was invited to North Kohala, a rural region on the big island of Hawaii, to consider the conservation of the town's key piece of public art. Professional ethics of the art restoration field would have demanded that this piece be brought back to the artist's original intent—bronze with gilding. The restorer, though, underwent a virtual conversion. He migrated from the conservator's professional position of caring about techniques and materials, of being as he described himself, "culturally disabled," to one of profound engagement in the community's search, through intense dialogue, for the best answer to the question of how to honor the memory and continuing presence of their beloved ancestor who embodied the "Hawaiian essence"—through this restoration. Wharton learned that this particular dialogue needed to occur on the community's own terms (a special mix of openness and private conversation, or Hawaiian "talk story")—not necessarily following primarily "Western ways" characterized by a more public deliberative approach. The result of an opinion ballot implemented by the Kamehameha restoration committee, a deeply democratic effort in itself, favored painting the statue in bright and lifelike colors reflecting the idiosyncratic history of the piece in North Kohala. It was a decision that favored community aspirations over normative ideas of artistic integrity. The conservator, by now, had enthusiastically embraced the decision. He became an advocate for community engagement in conservation issues. He became an advocate for involvement on questions of ownership—who owns a particular tradition and how does it need to be protected? He became an advocate for community discovery of its own particular ways of expressing doubts and fears about its identity and material culture, and of thinking through "right and wrong" ways of protecting cultural patrimony. The conservator, who typically operates as an authority, became a facilitator of, and collaborator in, community process. His knowledge was only part of what mattered. Authority, ultimately, was vested in the community.

Art museum exhibitions normally develop from a curatorial idea, which then puts in motion a team effort to support the idea through interpretive labels, brochures, programming, and educational activities. Once the idea for an exhibition is approved, questions of contextualization take on an important role. Rarely is the idea of civic dialogue entertained, except perhaps as a defensive measure once a show has proved to be too controversial. The more progressive the museum, the sooner the education or outreach department is included. In a controversial exhibition, the education department's role becomes absolutely crucial because, if the ideas generated do not quickly embrace a concern for the public, the most well-meaning exhibition is likely to harden positions, rather than encouraging new thoughts and perceptions. When inflexibility sets in, the possibilities of civic dialogue diminish and the best that can be expected is debate and confrontation.

We have experienced this historically with the Smithsonian's *West as America* exhibition. It articulated challenging positions about the settling of the American West, that ran counter to accepted opinions and myths about our shared history. Because its education department did not immediately open up dialogue with the public, the museum suffered, engendering a level of hostility that polarized citizens and, eventually, affected the entire museum community. The same phenomenon occurred with the *Enola Gay* exhibition which challenged accepted beliefs about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan. Because the challenge to prevailing histories was ill-timed and badly handled, with dueling positions established between "intellectuals" and veterans, the show had to be radically curtailed and positions froze. One could fairly say that no new learning, either for museums as cultural organizations in a civic context, or for those with a stake in the historic presentation, occurred in this case, because no dialogue occurred.

Our discussions at the Learning Exchange suggested that there is often a disconnect between the traditional role of the museum as arbiter of meaning for the general public and the growing idea of the museum as a site where ambiguity within exhibitions is acceptable, and even valued. This latter role encourages members of the public to think as individuals and as communities about the complex dimensions of sensitive issues. The rhetorical mantle that museums are increasingly donning, calling themselves "safe arenas" for exchange about the theses of these challenging shows, has proven itself to be problematic. Indeed, we know that the bridge to the public can be especially intimidating to cross when a show is extremely provocative and when traditional audiences' cherished beliefs and normal expectations are either assumed or challenged.

It became clear through our discussions in Seattle that it requires proactive programming, such as contextualization and civic dialogue, for an extremely provocative idea to transform itself into a constructive one for audiences. Without these efforts, conversation on sensitive topics stalls out. In all of the museum projects discussed at the Learning Exchange, the dialogic process began with exhibition planning and dialogue with community well before the exhibition opened to the public. In this way these projects differ from exhibitions where dialogue begins only after the exhibition opens. Dialogue activity included workshops, community gatherings, preparation of the teachers, focus groups, and conversations of a variety of stripes. These early efforts were intended to promote understanding and interchange, as well as to encourage a safe environment once the show was opened. I think it became clear that all of the exhibitions studied in Seattle—*Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and *Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics* at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington—did a superb job in advancing their respective audience's conversations. But, at the Learning Exchange, we also had to face the reality that, although open and constructive conversation around controversial issues such as the Holocaust, lynching in America, and the human genome can be encouraged, some of the attitudes surrounding these subjects are so sensitive that they can be pushed only so far. Civic dialogue can promote discourse, but it has to be done with extreme care so as not to push some audiences to a point of counterproductivity. (See sidebar below for specifics about each museum's dialogue activity.)

The question of how much contextualization is too much was also discussed at the Learning Exchange. *Mirroring Evil* and *Gene(sis)* were both challenged to strike a balance between enough information and too much to both engage with the work and to generate dialogue about civic issues. In the Jewish Museum's controversial exhibition, *Mirroring Evil*, the museum decided to maximize contextualization. It framed a series of questions meant to move around in the spectator's head as they wandered through the exhibition. Who can speak for the Holocaust? How has art used Nazi imagery to represent evil? What are the limits of irreverence? Why must we confront evil? How has art helped to break the silence?

Although this degree of contextualization can be distracting and irritating to some more "sophisticated" viewers who want to decide for themselves the meaning of artworks, it also became clear that, as a rule in controversial exhibitions, it is better to err with more rather than less context in order to prevent misunderstanding.

*Mirroring Evil* was an extremely difficult exhibition for almost any audience, but particularly for many Jewish visitors because it shifted the subject of the Holocaust from the victims to the perpetrators. Questions replete with moral ambiguity flooded the exhibition, bringing to the forefront concerns in the minds of many of its supporters about the role of this museum.

The curatorial/educational team at the Jewish Museum tried to reduce misunderstanding by beginning their preparation and education long in advance of the show's opening. And, once it opened, they offered daily dialogues in the museum's coffee shop for those interested, as well as other thematic panel discussions. That is, by adding many layers of mediation they hoped to help current audiences as well as reach new people in new ways about the Holocaust.

Despite their diligent effort, the layer of mediation that stuck was the one provided by the media. The newspapers, seeing the catalogue early, began their coverage of the show well before it opened. The work, then, was written about by people who had not seen it and who demonized it early on—people who were clearly not interested in promoting dialogue. The media decided unilaterally against the show, and the verdict was in before the Jewish Museum could reach a critical mass of their own large public. Indeed, the museum expected controversy but was surprised by the degree of agitation the show provoked.

The discussion of the *Mirroring Evil* exhibition reminded us that museums are traditionally considered to be places that clarify issues and positions with respect to culture. From curatorial positions advanced through the shows to unsigned didactic labels, from authoritative catalogues to expensive buildings and projects, we have paved the way to be considered as such in the public's mind. So that, when we decide to transform our museums (especially museums that are not identified as primarily contemporary art museums) into morally ambiguous sites, we find that not everyone feels comfortable with this shift. At the same time, the dialogues engendered by *Mirroring Evil* did allow for the breaking of taboos by asking questions such as "Who can speak for the Holocaust?"

The above issues were intensified and underlined by the experiences around the *Gene(sis)* exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery. *Gene(sis)* investigates questions around the human genome and related issues such as cloning. This art exhibition perhaps requires more attention, and maybe even more knowledge and patience, to get at its moral implications because it is firmly based in science. The didactics are richly informative, but involve a serious commitment to stay with them and to reach the heart of the show's thesis. Because the exhibition is so "information-based," a great deal of intervention from the museum itself is needed to generate dialogue.

During the Exchange we experienced three methods, or orientations, of viewing the exhibition and then engaging in dialogue. The Henry Gallery's education team used Phillip Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) approach. VTS is a method of inquiry that draws out viewer response and explores information about an artwork meaningful to the viewer. Questioning of visitors by museum staff begins very simply and progresses to storytelling, personal associations, and interpretation. The idea is to reveal information about the artwork throughout the discussion and guide the direction of the questioning to places that illuminate the work while stressing the discovery of meaning and focusing on deeper ideas.

This approach allowed visitors to verbalize their concerns generated by the most radical art and its attendant scientific ideas. The VTS method was handled flexibly and generously, in that the tour leaders explained basic scientific concepts so that an informed conversation could begin. Simultaneously Socratic and teacherly, the Henry version of VTS elicited heartfelt and smart responses, and was able to handle both the nervousness and the curiosity generated by the disturbing images on display. Questions about the ethics and morality of both artists and scientists who undertake to work with this material began to emerge and a level of inquiry about the important questions raised by the curatorial thesis was encouraged.

Using elements from Liz Lerman Dance Exchange's artistic practice, Liz Lerman led participants in a movement-based dialogue exploring meaning and response to Eduardo Kac's *Gene(sis)* installation. Lerman and company members had been to Seattle some weeks earlier to conduct a gallery dialogue around this same piece. At the Learning Exchange, participants experienced selected activities from this earlier session. Elements of Dance Exchange's Critical Response Process (a multistep format for conducting conversations about art which Lerman originally developed as a way for an artist to engage in dialogue with a group of responders about a work-in-progress) were synthesized with other dimensions of its practice that tap the body's capacity for holding memory and offer a gauge for intellectual and emotional reactions. For example, based on participants' experience of Kac's installation, Lerman asked "What was meaningful to you?" Individuals spoke, then, recalling movement and gestures from certain participants' responses, Lerman engaged the group in performing those gestures together, eventually creating an entire movement phrase to music. Harvesting gestures from individual experiences simultaneously created a deeply personal and collective experience in an arts space where collective experience is not the norm. For some, acting out the "angst and tension" that Kac's piece provoked relieved these feelings, making it possible to talk more easily about the issues. For others, the gestures enhanced listening and gave deeper meaning to words.

At Seattle's Town Hall, the possibilities of civic dialogue were further expanded by a Henry-sponsored opportunity for the public to attend a session with two geniuses of DNA, Dr. Leroy Hood and Dr. Lee Hartwell, recent Nobel Prize winner. The event prompted discussion regarding if and how to integrate art into civic dialogue forums that are set apart in time or space from the related artistic activity. In my opinion, the forum was a powerful tool for advancing civic dialogue precisely because it was off-site and therefore somewhat distanced from the art itself—art that was so often disturbing (understandably) to entrenched religious, political, and aesthetic convictions.

The Andy Warhol Museum decided to do the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition because staff members felt it fulfilled a part of the institutional mission that had up until now gone unaddressed—that of engaging in civic dialogue through

exhibition programming. They also felt the exhibition was a positive way of responding to a spate of racially motivated killings in Pittsburgh. Curator Margery King stressed that the full idea for the show came first—in the tradition of the art museum system—and that the apparatus for working with the community in its interpretation and civic dialogue possibilities immediately followed that decision.

Thus the museum began work to include all interested parties in their programming and was successful in making this difficult show approachable and constructive. Still it was hard to include every single stakeholder in their planning. While acknowledging that the outreach process can never be perfectly inclusive, the museum was able, through constant retooling, to bring in all groups that desired entry. The Warhol Museum moved rapidly and brilliantly, on all fronts, to make the museum both a challenging and a safe place for the very unsafe topic of lynching in America and its contemporary implications. Without the constant effort to engage in dialogue, this could not have happened.

Out of the *Without Sanctuary* discussion came the expressed concern about the responsibility we assume (or don't assume) when we open our institutions to the possibilities of civic dialogue about highly emotional and charged issues (as in *Without Sanctuary*, when we "unbury" the dead). Lisa James of the San Francisco Opera worried about what happens after a successful endeavor when we move on to our next projects. The seeds we have planted will have either taken root, grown and thrived, or may have taken on unexpected forms or died. She asked, if they have grown, will we ever come back to tend those mature plants? Will we help them to take on new and positive life and manifestations? Will we create civic dialogue around what we have fostered?

Museums in the Animating Democracy Initiative have traveled far beyond the territory normally inhabited by museums. They have earnestly explored varied dialogue approaches, summoning up significant institutional and leadership flexibility in the process. They have also demonstrated a greater sense of public responsibility than have museums taking on such controversial projects in the past. By means of dialogue, the most challenging thesis can enter into the life of the polis. At the same time, the process is difficult and extracts enormous commitments from institutions to work together from creative idea to presentation and beyond. The rhetoric of arts institution as both challenging and safe places may be a realizable goal. Even museums will be able to achieve it to the extent that they can welcome dialogue, not just in their public programming, but also in the other usually anonymous, ubiquitous, and authority-based apparatuses of museum education--the interpretive panels and labels, the brochures and the catalogues. These are the places where our audiences experience our exhibitions first and most immediately. There is still much to explore, much to improve.

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**Selma Holo** is the Director of University of Southern California Fisher Gallery and the graduate master's degree program in Art History and Museum Studies. She has held this dual appointment since the summer of 1981. Holo is also a full professor at USC. Prior to coming to the University of Southern California, Holo was Curator of Acquisitions at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena where she assisted Simon between 1977 and 1981 in his development of that museum's superb collection of painting and sculpture.

## Snapshots of the Museums and their ADI Exhibition Efforts

Following are descriptions of the three exhibitions and public dialogue activities mounted by museums participating in the Animating Democracy Lab. At the time of this article, full reporting on the exhibitions and their outcomes is not yet available. Stay tuned to the Animating Democracy web site for case studies on each of these projects.

### **Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

In fall 2001, the Andy Warhol Museum presented the traveling exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, 100 photographic prints and postcards from 1870 to 1960 that document the history of lynching in the United States. In the context of racially motivated killings in Pittsburgh that heightened existing racial tensions, the exhibition aimed to provide a potent context for dialogue about race in Pittsburgh.

In addition to the lynching photographs, an illustrated timeline provided a detailed context for the subject of lynching and its history. Three other displays offered varying contexts for the exhibition. The role of the artist as activist was explored through the life and work of singer Billie Holiday and her signature song "Strange Fruit," a powerful indictment of lynching. The Pittsburgh Courier and the Anti-Lynching Movement provided historical context through an examination of this seminal African American newspaper's history and role in the anti-lynching movement. A contemporary context was provided by artist Lonnie Graham's collage *A Contemporary View: Media 1996--2001*. These exhibition components served to balance the victimization of African Americans with stories of African Americans' historical and contemporary responses to lynching.

Another gallery was devoted to discussion and resources. Its walls were covered with quotes by anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, Martin Luther King, Jr., artist Adrian Piper, poet Czeslaw Milosz, and others. This space provided a large discussion area for daily *Without Sanctuary* dialogues, in addition to a meeting space for visiting groups. A wide range of books and other reading materials on lynching and related subjects, as well as information on organizations, groups, and activities for "next steps," were also available. A table and display area invited visitors to write *A Postcard for Tolerance*, a personal resolution addressed to themselves and mailed by the museum after the close of the exhibition.

Intensive dialogue first took place during the planning stages. The Warhol worked closely with a Community Advisory Group to determine how the exhibition should be presented and interpreted both within and outside the museum. The African American community's interests were especially sought and considered through this group and other individuals in the community. As a largely white institution, the Warhol understood it needed to listen and to gain insights into how best to present *Without Sanctuary* to create a safe and engaging environment in which to view these disturbing images and facilitate reflection and dialogue. Sherry Cottom of the YWCA Center for Race Relations was a central force in the planning and realization of public dialogues, including training of dialogue facilitators.

During the exhibition's run, the museum's artist/educators (practicing artists with experience in education and community-based art practice) were continually available in the gallery space to talk with visitors and to encourage reflection on their experience through written comments or contributing their thoughts on video. The diverse voices on video and in print were available for all visitors, allowing an opportunity to read, listen, and appreciate other points of view. A small adjacent gallery was constructed as a more private, quiet space for visitors.

Approximately 1,000 people engaged in daily dialogue sessions in which visitors had the option to share with each other their reactions to the images. Dialogues were co-led by the museum's artist/educators and community

facilitators from the NAACP's Pittsburgh Branch, National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), The Urban League of Pittsburgh, YWCA Center for Race Relations, as well as other organizations and experienced individuals.

A wide range of groups--church groups, diversity coalitions, businesses, college students, and community organizations--took advantage of special viewings of the exhibition and dialogue sessions run by artist/educators. Some community groups used the dialogue space for meetings and organized their own discussions related to the exhibition.

Many related programs organized by the museum, partner organizations, and/or the community coordinating committee incorporated poetry, film, visual art, and other explorations of history during the run of the exhibition. Among them: On opening day, which fell only weeks after September 11th, diverse religious leaders participated in "Hate and Organized Religion: Part of the Solution, Part of the Problem." "The Pittsburgh Courier and Pittsburgh Perspectives on Lynching in America" brought together Frank Bolden and Edna B. McKenzie, two veteran reporters from the premier African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*. As long-time Pittsburgh citizens and eye-witnesses to the recent history of race relations, they considered the changing dynamics of race in Pittsburgh and the U.S. from journalistic and historical perspectives. The Warhol Theater presented *Minstrel Show* which tells the story of the 1919 lynching of William Brown in Omaha, Nebraska, from the point of view of two itinerant African American minstrels. Poet Michael S. Harper and other poets read their work and led a dialogue on art as resistance in collaboration with Suncrums, Pittsburgh Poetry Exchange, and University of Pittsburgh Contemporary Writers Series.

The exhibition was held over for several weeks, concluding on Martin Luther King Day, January 2002 and posting attendance of over 30,000 people, the highest ever for a Warhol show.

### ***Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics, The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington***

*Gene(sis): Contemporary Art Explores Human Genomics* (which closed in August 2002 and will subsequently travel) presented new work created in response to recent developments in the science of human genomics. From digitally altered photographs of "manimals" and artistic explorations of other transgenic beings, to DNA portraits and abstract "gene-mapping" paintings, *Gene(sis)* explored the potential social, emotional, and ethical implications of the Human Genome Project. The exhibition features commissions of new works by artists Shawn Brixey, Jill Reynolds, and Paul Vanouse and Richard Rinehart who collaborated with genomics scientists as well as 50 other thought-provoking artworks. Interweaving humorous commentary, theatrical installations, documentary images, and pseudo- (or actual) scientific laboratory situations, the exhibition elucidates technical developments for a wide audience and exploits the power of contemporary art to provoke, question, and articulate issues of biogenetics.

*Gene(sis)*—the exhibition and the public programs—resulted from a three-year collaborative and cross-disciplinary endeavor involving a working group of artists, scientists, historians, bioethicists, representatives of the biotechnology industry, and museum professionals engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the potential meanings and impact of current genomic research and development on our understanding of human life and identity.

To encourage dialogue among gallery visitors, the Henry experimented with a number of different approaches. Curatorial staff adapted the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) method, developed by Philip Yenawine, standardly used in its education programs. VTS is a method of inquiry that draws out viewer response and explores information about an artwork meaningful to the viewer (see also Selma Holo's essay). Drawing on faculty expertise within the University, a series of topical discussions was held; for example, Asking Feminist Questions of Science and Culture led by anthropologists and an English scholar. Noted dancer/choreographer Liz Lerman and members of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (also participating in the Animating Democracy Lab) presented *The Permeable Membrane: A Dialogue on Art and Issues*. Dance Exchange, known for its community workshops and participatory events, led a movement-based dialogue exploring the layers of meaning and response to Eduardo Kac's *Genesis* installation featured in the Henry exhibition. Elements of Dance Exchange's Critical Response Process (a multistep format for conducting conversations about art Lerman originally developed as a way for an artist to engage in dialogue with a group of responders about a work-in-progress) were synthesized with other dimensions of its practice that tap the body's capacity for holding memory and offer a gauge for intellectual and emotional reactions.

Critical Art Ensemble, a collective of five artists of various specializations dedicated to exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics, and critical theory, presented *Genterra*. This tactical performance engaged passersby in making decisions about releasing hybrid organisms into the ecosystem. A film series surveyed provocative film and video works that have engaged the human genome either as focus or foil; from the controversial 1932 feature film *Island of the Lost Souls*, in which grotesque experiments accelerate human evolution, to *The Secret Adventures of Tom Thumb* (1944), a phenomenal stop-motion animation about a grimy world centered around a genetics lab.

The exhibition functioned as a catalyst for a robust schedule of public programs throughout the Puget Sound region. The programs were developed through the *Gene(sis)* Community Advisory Committee and collaborative partnerships with the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for Humanities at the University of Washington, the Seattle Public Library's Center for the Book, Washington State Board of Health, and the Seattle Biomedical Research Institute, among others.

A symposium and public forum, *Paradigms Lost and Found: The Implications of the Human Genome Project*, organized with the Center for Humanities, brought together speakers from the fields of art, science, philosophy, and history to discuss artistic response to and potential societal changes as a result of the Human Genome Project. Themes included: "The Human Species: Who and What Are We Becoming," "Bioethics and Public Policy," and "Genomics and Contemporary Art," among others.

Through its network of more than 150 book groups, the Washington Center for the Book explored two titles in association with *Gene(sis)*: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Mendel's Dwarf* by Simon Mawer, complete with study guides and facilitated discussions. The Center also developed a *Gene(sis)* recommended reading list of fiction and nonfiction, as well as titles for children and young adults, intended to stimulate discussion.

Following its premiere at the Henry Art Gallery, *Gene(sis)* travels nationally to the Berkeley Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley (August 26--November 16, 2003) and the Frederick Weisman Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis (January 25--May 2, 2004). A Dialogue Tool Box will accompany the show to prompt other sites to mount public conversations in conjunction with the show. The *Gene(sis)* website is the online companion to the exhibition. Conceived as a multilayered resource center and discussion forum, visitors find online components of artworks in the show, contextual information such as artist statements, bios, essays, and suggested readings, and are encouraged to participate in online discussions.

### ***Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art, The Jewish Museum, New York City, New York***

The exhibition *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, which featured artworks by artists two and three generations removed from the events of WWII, offered a springboard for dialogue about complicity and complacency toward evil in today's society. The museum showed work by thirteen artists who have eschewed the deeply entrenched Holocaust imagery that focuses on the victim. Instead, employing the challenging language of conceptual art, these artists used images of perpetrators—Nazis—to provoke viewers to explore the seduction of power as well as contemporary manifestations of evil in the form of bigotry, war, and genocide.

Because of the anticipated provocative nature of the exhibition, dialogue permeated planning processes within the museum and outside it. A cross-departmental museum staff team worked closely over three years with several partner organizations—Facing History and Ourselves, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL), the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at the New School University, The New York Public Library, and others—to frame the issues for dialogue, plan programs, discuss interpretive approaches, and design dialogue opportunities both in and outside the museum.

Each of the interpretive components developed for the exhibition was based on one or more issues. The issues were framed as five cornerstone questions (as opposed to closed-ended information) in order to promote rather than shut down dialogue. They were: Who can speak for the Holocaust? How has art used Nazi imagery to represent evil? What are the limits of irreverence? Why must we confront evil? How has art helped to break the silence? These questions aimed to keep viewers moving back and forth between art and the broader issues of evil and complacency in contemporary society.

Within the galleries, an opening video provided historical and cultural context through images from television, film, and popular culture, and offered the five questions for visitors to consider as they viewed the artworks. A second video at the end of the exhibition captured opinions and points of view from artists and diverse members of different communities reacting to the exhibition. Extensive labeling provided insight into artists' intent and attempted to bring viewers into the five questions and to minimize misinterpretation of the work. Docents, wearing buttons saying "Ask me," were trained to answer questions and help visitors interpret the works. A space at the end of the exhibition invited written visitor feedback and responses. Four guided tours were presented throughout the day.

Each day, a late-afternoon public dialogue took place in a private area of the museum café. The dialogues were facilitated by a museum staff person trained by the museum's partner organizations—CLAL (National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership) and Facing History and Ourselves. These dialogue opportunities intended to help people deal with emotional responses to the work as well as explore the issues raised by the exhibition. In addition to this drop-in opportunity, the museum coordinated a weekly dialogue with invited guests from various constituency groups, for example, the Holocaust survivor community. Several of the partners hosted public dialogues. Themes taken up in panel discussion and dialogue formats included: how the representation of evil in art can deepen understanding of the human condition; who can speak for the Holocaust; and how images of the Holocaust and Nazis have infiltrated advertising and popular culture.

The museum developed special plans for school groups, concerned that the exhibition not be used by teachers as a singular opportunity to teach the Holocaust. Working closely with Facing History and Ourselves, staff developed three mandatory seminars for teachers and a curriculum guide.

Significantly, extensive local and national media attention before *Mirroring Evil* officially opened fueled an explosion of media response to the exhibition. The exhibition catalog was released early at a private opening, which prompted an inflammatory Wall Street Journal article emphasizing some Holocaust survivors' distress about the show and comparing the show to the Brooklyn Art Museum's controversial *Sensation* exhibition. Some journalists then located images on the Internet and from other sources and printed them in their own articles; others wrote opinion pieces based on what they had heard about it. This press coverage provided a highly charged context for seeing the exhibit. Media influenced response by members of the Jewish community, the arts community, and the public, some of whom did not see the show. Recorded comments and letters indicated a disparity in the responses of those who saw the show and those who did not.

In its trajectory from intensive and inclusive planning through the closing of the exhibition, *Mirroring Evil* catalyzed discourse within the Jewish community, the art world, and for publics that both attended the show and its range of public programs, as well as those who "participated" by engaging in the ideas, opinions, editorials, and letters to editors presented in the media.