

## Education Programs As Civic Dialogue

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A momentum has emerged in the North American museum community for cultural institutions to become more responsive to the broader community and less exclusionary. Evidence of this trend can be found in the results of the "Community and Museums Initiative" sponsored by the American Association of Museums (AAM). For four years (1998-2002), communities and cultural institutions across the United States participated in dialogues exploring the relationships between them. This initiative became a top priority of the AAM Board of Directors as they determined that there was a need for museums to analyze their missions, explore their roles in the communities where they exist, and perhaps redefine their institutional objectives.<sup>1</sup>

Great strides have been made since then to further unite museums with their communities. Arts-based civic dialogue is emerging in many disciplines, and, as noted in *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*, a report commissioned by the Ford Foundation and published in 1999 by Americans for the Arts, "Innovations in museum education, including inquiry-driven approaches to interpretive materials have prompted more open-ended investigations of context and perspectives."<sup>1</sup> The programs and community outreach initiatives of the education departments at both the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art encourage investigations of community concerns and issues and provide a critical link between these museums and their publics. Presently, the programs of the education departments at both museums exemplify forms of civic engagement that, though they vary in nature, incorporate similar community-oriented goals. These programs furthermore compose a critical source of real-world examples of active civic engagement by art museums.

The Whitney's *Youth Insights* (YI) program is one example of an institution-based endeavor with goals linked to producing potentially quantifiable positive change in the citywide community. The Guggenheim Museum's *Learning Through Art* (LTA) program is an enduring arts-in-education program that likewise provides a direct connection to the New York City community by placing artists in public schools throughout the city. Facilitating civic dialogue is a critical component of the pedagogy utilized in both programs.

Conceived in 1970 in response to the elimination of arts programs in New York City's public schools, the Guggenheim's LTA program engages students and families in civic dialogue. Program founder and Guggenheim trustee Natalie K. Leiberman believed strongly in the power of art to enhance and deepen student learning. At the beginning of each school year, members of the Guggenheim's education department interview and select individuals who will serve as teaching artists in New York City's public school classrooms on a weekly basis for one academic year. Using art as a source for guided dialogue, the teaching artists challenge students to consider issues from a variety of perspectives and then to incorporate their ideas and reactions into creative projects.

Since its inception, LTA's teaching artists (artists-in-residence) have implemented programs that "link to Guggenheim exhibitions while considering the interests, needs, and abilities of students."<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, LTA teaching artists develop art-based exploration projects based on a class'

targeted curriculum area. Students examine issues related to the semester's learning objectives, discuss these issues extensively, and explore them through art-making projects that are collaboratively facilitated by both the classroom teachers and teaching artists. The artists' residencies last from ten to twenty weeks and are primarily subsidized by the Guggenheim.

Residency artists are required to spend one and a half hours each week with three different classes. Workshop-based training between Guggenheim LTA administrators and teaching artists is ongoing throughout the residency. Teaching artists work closely with classroom teachers to discuss curricular goals, write lesson plans and develop projects. Additionally, teaching artists collaborate with Guggenheim Sackler Educators (who work within the museum) to develop tours of current Guggenheim exhibitions that correspond to concepts being explored in classes. For example, during the James Rosenquist retrospective exhibition (Oct. 2003 – Feb. 2004), one class of third graders was in the classroom exploring challenges faced by New York City communities in the past and how those challenges have changed over time. In the museum, these students focused on Rosenquist's paintings as reflective of the time when they were created and how those images deal with problematic aspects of life in the U.S. Tours are given to participating classes three times during the residency and are led by both Sackler Educators and the teaching artist.

Not only does the program promote learning about civic issues and facilitate their discussion, it also helps unite families and the museum by sponsoring bi-annual Family Days and providing participating students' families with free admission passes for the academic year. While Family Days are not unique to the Guggenheim, their events are extremely well planned and organized with a great deal of emphasis on making family members feel welcome during their visit. Art-making activities that correlate with the art on display and include both parents and siblings of LTA participants take place throughout the museum. Additional activities are held in the Studio Art Lab of the Sackler Center for Education at the Guggenheim.

The *Youth Insights* (YI) program of the Whitney Museum is another excellent example of a museum-based education program that promotes civic dialogue and civic-minded activities among young participants. Initiated in 1997, this pioneering program trains high school students to talk about 20th century and contemporary art. Each year, from September through July, a group of high school students participates in an on-going training program that includes workshops, discussion groups, tours and field excursions geared to developing their knowledge of American culture and art. Outside reading and other preparation are required. This training prepares students to lead exhibition tours, discussion groups and workshops at the Whitney for a dynamic group of audiences ranging from teens to seniors and including families. One goal of the program is to create intergenerational dialogues amongst people who speak from historical and contemporary viewpoints that span the century.<sup>3</sup>

The commitment required of YI participants is extensive, as students are expected to take on a variety of roles at the museum and be integrally involved in public programming for the Whitney. Participants are required to lead "Youth to Youth" museum tours for other teens every third Friday of the month. Rather than one-sided monologues, these inquiry-based tours are dialogues about the art on display and issues related to social and historical context. YI students must also commit to assisting in an after-school program for children aged 5–14 one evening each week at the museum for the duration of the program. These children are from the Regents Family

Residence, a transitional housing facility for temporarily displaced families. The program engages them in discussions about the art on display and in art-making activities facilitated by YI participants. Throughout the year, YI participants become friends and mentors to the children of Regents House, establishing close relationships that are significant for both the children and YI participants. Program goals include fostering self-empowerment and self-expression as well as encouraging personal achievement through the arts.<sup>4</sup> Youth are encouraged to visit museums regularly and admission to the Whitney is always free for students with a New York City public school ID.

YI participants are furthermore responsible for working with seniors in the museum and in senior homes throughout the city. YI “teen docents” develop slide lectures for presentation in senior homes throughout the city. Hands-on art-making workshops and visits to the museum typically accompany these programs. A goal of this program is to engage seniors and youth in discussions about American art and how it relates to life for members of the different generations represented.

Collectively, many of the programs of the education departments at these two institutions are achieving goals outlined in the American Association of Museums’ 2002 publication *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, such as building personal and community health and developing social capital.<sup>5</sup> Such socially oriented programs unite diverse individuals and promote the museum as a kind of community resource center. In the future, it would be positive to see these and other cultural institutions continue to develop their roles as community centers by expanding community-based outreach efforts to include new objectives.

Civic engagement occurs when museums and their communities intersect, when the museum becomes a center where people gather to meet and converse, a place that celebrates the richness of individual and collective experiences. These possibilities are inherent in every museum’s own definition and expression of community. Over the past five years or so, more museums have made commitments to encourage individual and community health and to build social capital through educational and public programming. Tangible goals related to such efforts have been outlined by the AAM in its *Museums and Community Initiative*. In order to continue to make such institutions valued entities for a diversity of society’s members, new roles for museums must continue to be explored and efforts to strengthen community ties must persist. Both the Guggenheim and Whitney museums provide solid models of civic engagement that should be acknowledged as such and utilized.

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<sup>1</sup> Museums and Communities Initiative, American Association of Museums, Copyright 1999, available at <http://www.aam-us.org/initiatives/m&c>, accessed December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Learning Through Art: A Program of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2003, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, available at <http://www.guggenheim.org>, accessed December 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Youth Insights, copyright 2003, Whitney Museum of American Art, available at <http://www.youth2youth.org/whatis/whatisyi.html>, accessed December 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2002, particularly in the contributions by Ellen Hirzy (pp. 9-22), Christopher Gates (pp. 23-28), Miriam Noland and Katie Goatley (pp. 45-58), and Irene Hirano (pp. 77-78).